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An Investigation of Factors Identified By Novice Teachers That Influence Performance
on Standardized Assessments and Teacher Performance

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
In
The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

By

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M.Ed., McNeese State University, 1995
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December 2007

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The completion of this dissertation would not have been possible without much help, support, and encouragement. I would like to take this opportunity to thank these special ones who have sustained me throughout this endeavor.

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave me the knowledge and wisdom to complete this doctoral journey. I referred to scripture and relied on prayer to give me the strength I needed. *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me...Philippians 4:13*

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Finally, to the participants of this study, who willingly gave of themselves through their personal storytelling.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Joe David and Nancy Odom, whose love and support has been invaluable. Thanks for always loving me and believing in me. I love you, mama and daddy.

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Abstract

Entry in the teaching profession is often dependent on a number of steps or phases involving standardized assessments and performance assessments. The relationships between and among the variables incorporated in such instruments are typically assumed, but not necessarily substantiated. Furthermore, the relationships between the variables assessed and factors involved in teacher preparation have not been investigated. This study was designed to investigate the nature of such relationships in one particular case.

In the spring of 1997, the Louisiana legislature changed the Louisiana Teacher Assessment Program to create the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program (LaTAAP). LaTAAP is a uniform statewide program for new teachers entering service for the first time in a Louisiana Public School System. Through LaTAAP, each new teacher is assigned a mentor teacher who helps him or her transition into the career of education as successfully and effectively as possible (Louisiana Department of Education, Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003).

The Praxis is a series of tests developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS) that provides tests and other services for states to use as a part of their teacher licensing and certification process. The Praxis Series is currently required for teacher licensure in Louisiana and 43 other states and U.S. jurisdictions (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2005-2006).

The purpose of this study was intended to address relationships by investigating the factors identified by novice teachers as influencing their performance on Praxis and LaTAAP. Additionally, this study addressed whether the mentoring

component increased teachers' sense of their capacity to teach effectively. The central research question was:

What factors or issues are identified by novice teachers as influences on their performance in standardized assessments and classroom teaching effectiveness?

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach employing data collection techniques consisting of personal questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups. Data were collected exclusively from ten participants who completed LaTAAP over the past four years and passed Praxis.

An analysis of the data revealed several commonalities of the participants' Praxis and LaTAAP experiences which have had an effect on their professional practice. The issues in common included professional growth, mentoring, and testing.

Keywords:

mentoring novice teachers Praxis professional growth effective teachers

Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program (LaTAAP)

Preface

As a child, I could not wait to start school. I loved school from kindergarten through graduate school. I had wonderful teachers that influenced my thoughts and ideas about education. I can remember my first grade teacher sharing knowledge with her students. I would go home and play school for hours with my sisters, neighbors, friends, and dolls. I believe it was then that the seeds of teaching were planted within me.

When my college years began, I first majored in General Studies while I made certain of my future career. After my first year of college, I changed my major to Elementary Education. As I attended education classes, I began to realize the impact that my teachers had upon me. They were not only my teachers, but my mentors as well. I had been influenced by their love of teaching and love of children. These experiences opened my eyes to the importance of mentors.

As a teacher, I have been fortunate enough to have been mentored on different levels. I had a mentor at the elementary level and the university level. Mentors at both levels proved to be beneficial. I have also had the opportunity of serving as a mentor to novice teachers. I enjoyed sharing the successes and failures I had experienced through the years with new teachers. Through LaTAAP, I also serve as an external evaluator.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Study

Entry in the teaching profession is often dependent on a number of steps or phases involving standardized assessments and performance assessments. The relationships between and among the variables incorporated in such instruments are typically assumed, but not necessarily substantiated. Furthermore, the relationships between the variables assessed and factors involved in teacher preparation have not been investigated. This study is designed to investigate the nature of such relationships in one particular case.

Background and Context of the Problem

Louisiana uses two primary assessments for entry in the teaching profession, Praxis and the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program. The Praxis is a series of tests developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS) that provides tests and other services for states to use as a part of their teacher licensing and certification process. The Praxis is currently required for teacher licensure in Louisiana. Praxis I: Pre-Professional Skills Tests (PPST) is intended to be taken early in a candidate's college career to measure basic skills in reading writing, and mathematics skills. The Praxis II: Subject Assessments is taken by every candidate exiting an accredited teacher education program in the state. Praxis II measures content knowledge of the subjects one will teach. The Praxis II: Subject Assessments include four areas of testing including Specialty Area Tests, Multiple Subject Assessment for Teachers (MSAT), Principles of Learning and Teaching (PLT), and Teaching Foundations. The Specialty Area Tests are multiple-choice and constructed-response items that measure general and subject-specific teaching skills and knowledge. MSAT was developed to assess knowledge and high-

order thinking skills of prospective elementary school teachers. PLT uses a case study approach with constructed-response and multiple-choice items to measure pedagogical knowledge at grade levels. The Teaching Foundations Tests feature constructed-response and multiple-choice items to assess pedagogy in multi-subjects (The Praxis Series Bulletin, 2005-2006). In Louisiana, Praxis I allows or blocks entry into teacher education programs and Praxis II allows or blocks the exit.

Recent studies conducted by the United States Department of Education, ETS, and the Louisiana Department of Education have shown that Praxis and LaTAAP are both important to enhance or verify effectiveness in Louisiana. However, there are no studies that indicate relationships or commonalities among the variables of the assessments and aspects of the experiences of teacher preparation. This study is intended to investigate the concern for these relationships by investigating the factors identified by novice teachers as influencing their performance on Praxis and LaTAAP.

The Louisiana Teacher Assessment Program (LaTAP) has been in operation since August 1, 1994. During the first years of LaTAP the program consisted of a support semester and an assessment semester. In the support semester, the three-person assessor team (principal, teacher, and external assessor) each visited the new teacher. During these visits, the assessors conducted “practice observations and interviews, shared results with the teacher, and assisted him/her in creating a professional development plan targeting strategies to improve weaker areas in the Louisiana Components of Effective Teaching” (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2002).

New teachers who completed the LaTAP consistently rated the assistance and support of their assessors, particularly experienced teachers, as one of the strongest parts of the program. Therefore, the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (BESE) requested that the support, or “mentoring,” phase of the program be strengthened (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

In 1997, the legislation changed LaTAP and created LaTAAP. The three- person assessment team was changed to a two-member team, which consisted of a principal/designee and an assessor external to the school. The team functioned only in the assessment semester. The mentor teacher was responsible for new teacher support and assistance. The mentor teacher served in this capacity for two semesters. During the 1997-1998 school year, the Louisiana Department of Education piloted the mentor program to determine policies, procedures, activities, and training before statewide implementation of the program occurred during the 1998-99 school year (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

In 2001 the BESE approved recommendations from the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Teacher Quality. The recommendations related to the LaTAAP emphasized the importance of mentoring and assistance for the success of new teachers. The amount of time new teachers are mentored at their schools was expanded to one full year before assessment due to recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission. In order to enhance the quality of interaction between mentors and new teachers, the mentoring program was changed from one year to two years (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

Recent studies conducted by the United States Department of Education, ETS, and the Louisiana Department of Education have shown that Praxis and LaTAAP are both important to enhance or verify effectiveness in Louisiana however there are no studies indeed that indicate relationships or commonalities between and among the variables of both. There is an assumption Colleges and Departments of Education have adopted these both but is there a reason?

Setting of the Study

The Louisiana Teacher Assessment Program (LTAP) has been operational since August 1, 1994. In the early years of the program (1994-1998), the program consisted of a support semester and an assessment semester. During the support semester, the three-person assessor team (principal, experienced teacher, and external assessor) each visited the new teacher. At this time, experienced teachers on the team were considered to be assessors rather than mentors. These experienced teachers were required to attend assessor training at the outset of their participation in LTAP. This assessor training took place regionally throughout the state, with teachers from two or more parishes attending.

In the spring of 1997, the Louisiana legislature changed the Louisiana Teacher Assessment Program to create the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program (LTAAP). LaTAAP is a uniform statewide program for new teachers entering service for the first time in a Louisiana Public School System.

The LaTAAP program consists of four semesters: semester 1 includes Assistance; semester 2 also includes Assistance; semester 3 includes Assessment; and semester 4 includes Assistance (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003, p. 9). Through LaTAAP, each new teacher is assigned

a mentor teacher who helps him or her transition into the career of education as successfully and effectively as possible (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003, p. 12).

The Praxis is a series of tests developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS) that provides tests and other services for states to use as a part of their teacher licensing and certification process. The Praxis Series is grounded in current research, including a complete job analysis of the most important tasks and skills required of beginning teachers and extensive surveys to confirm test validity (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2005-2006).

The Praxis Series is currently required for teacher licensure in Louisiana and 43 other states and U.S. jurisdictions. ETS ensures Praxis tests are valid and fair by determining the connection between the content of a test and the knowledge and /or skills judged important for entry-level practice.

In recent years, high-stakes tests have moved from relative obscurity to center stage in state and federal education policy (Wakefield, 2003, p. 381). The increasing interest in reforming the teaching profession has focused on the use of teacher tests and performance assessments to change the qualifications of the teaching force, to revise teacher preparation, and to impact the on-going professional development of educators (Pullin, 2001, p. 384).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is intended to address relationships by investigating the factors identified by novice teachers as influencing their performance on Praxis and LaTAAP.

Theoretical Framework of the Study

Mentoring as a source of learning has become particularly relevant given the nature of careers today. The fast-paced changing of organizational structure creates the need for fast-paced learning (Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 270). If mentors and mentees can profit from their professional practice and use their mentoring as a source of learning, the entire mentoring process will have been proven to be even more credible.

Given this placement of mentoring in the educational process, the work of two theorists Knowles and Dewey provide frames for this study. Through investigation of Malcolm Knowles' theory of adult learning and John Dewey's theory of experiential learning, recognition of the importance of these theories as they relate to adults who participate in the act of mentoring can be seen.

In 1980, Malcolm Knowles published his fundamental work about adult learning. His *Andragogy*, meaning "the art and science of helping adults learn, (Knowles, 1980, p. 43) is based on five assumptions about the adult learner (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 92). The basic concept of mentoring is an excellent fit with Knowles' model and Merriam & Caffarella's five assumptions, as stated below:

1. "As a person matures his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being", (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 272). Mentoring assists adults in this endeavor. As mentors attempt to help protégés move from a dependent personality toward a self-directing one, their own personal growth should be affected and strengthened.

2. An adult accumulates a growing reservoir of experience, which is a rich resource for learning” (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999, p. 272). Mentoring provides experiences which may otherwise not be supplied in adults’ daily professional practice. As these experiences accumulate, mentors are given a vast pool of information which can be drawn upon as they are presented with new opportunities of learning.
3. “The readiness of an adult to learn is closely related to the developmental tasks of his or her social role” (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999, p. 272). Mentors come to their role with expectations and preconceived ideas (Parker, 1999, p. 21). As they mentor, they must sharpen their role definition and decide how best to put it into practice. Throughout this process, their own readiness to learn can be strengthened.
4. “There is a change in time perspective as people mature – from future application of knowledge to immediacy of application” (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999, p. 272). Thus an adult is “more problem-centered than subject-centered in learning” (Knowles, 1980, pp. 44-45). A mentor’s job is mainly composed of problem solving – that is, helping protégés solve problems that are of immediate concern to them. Since the mentoring role is usually assumed at a more mature stage in life, mentors have reached this time perspective and are comfortable with the problem-centered rather than subject-centered approach to learning.
5. “Adults are motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external ones” (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999, p. 272). With the mentoring relationship being

an essentially internal one, learning takes place within the confines of that relationship. Mentor and protégé experiences alike become internal motivators for future learning.

Dewey (1938), in his classic volume *Experience and Education*, made some of the most thoughtful observations about the connections between life experiences and learning. More specifically, Dewey stated, “all genuine education comes about through experience” (p.13). For learning to happen through experience, Dewey argued that the experience must exhibit the two major principles of continuity and interaction: “The principle of the continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 27). Learners must connect what they have learned from current experiences to those in the past and must be intertwined with the old, always seeking to infuse future experiences which will follow in order to promote professional and personal growth.

The second principle, that of interaction, states that “an experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (Dewey, 1938, p. 41). The mentoring environment is rich with opportunities to grow, learn, and reflect. As mentors give transactions of time and knowledge to their protégé’s professional “accounts”, these accumulated experiences help build their own bank of knowledge.

In translating Dewey’s ideas into mentoring practice, what is key is how important the situation becomes in promoting learning. Developing a welcoming and comfortable atmosphere, providing the right materials, and linking these materials to

learners' past and future experiences is critical in assisting not only mentors, but also their protégés to learn from their experiences.

As aforementioned, these concepts of Knowles and Dewey, derived from the field of education, strongly contribute to the practice of mentoring. However, to adequately frame this study, one must explore additional theoretical perspectives in other fields of study.

The field of medicine has long been a proponent of mentoring (Schoener, 1996, p.38). The process of mentoring in the field of medicine is often referred to as internship or preceptorship. Preceptorship is recognized as “a clinical teaching strategy that eases the transition of students from the educational setting into the practice environment” (Schoener, 1996, p. 40). Similar to mentoring in the educational field, medical and nursing students follow the leadership and guidance of more experienced colleagues to expand their knowledge and expertise.

Michael Polanyi, a 20th century philosopher and scientist, developed the theory of “personal knowing”, considered by some to be the philosophical underpinning for nursing education (Hilton, 2002, p. 249). Polanyi's philosophy, based on a person's acquisition of knowledge, can be described as an apprenticeship, whereby a more learned person can “show someone, and apprentice, how to perform a task” (Hilton, 2002, p. 249). This apprenticeship approach has been applied to nursing education. Polanyi offers a holistic approach already present in modern-day nursing education where newer nurses, guided by experienced ones acting as mentors, learn by seeing, doing, touching, and experiencing (Hilton, 2002, p. 250).

Carl Rogers (1942) has written extensively on the qualities and attitudes important for the facilitation of learning and optimal development of individuals. Roger's theory has been instrumental in the development of a Collaborative Mentoring Program (CMP) at the Brody School of Medicine at East Carolina University. Roger's theory purports that "the provision of a safe, supportive learning environment facilitates the positive formation of relationships and trust between teacher and learner and, we would add, physicians and patients" (p. 35).

In conclusion, the works of Knowles, Dewey, Polanyi, and Rogers have been shown to contribute to mentoring programs throughout the fields of education and medicine. This study is framed by the works of these scholars.

The Research Question and Methodology

The central research question was developed based on an extensive review of mentoring literature, gaps in the research, and personal experiences as an external evaluator. Additionally, this study addressed whether the mentoring component increased teachers' sense of their capacity to teach effectively. The central research question is:

What factors or issues are identified by novice teachers as influences on their performance in standardized assessments and classroom teaching effectiveness?

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach employing data collection techniques consisting of personal questionnaires and focus groups.

Need for and Significance of the Study

The need for and significance of this study becomes apparent as one explores the mentoring literature. Even though mentor benefits have been numerous investigated

(Bozeman & Serpell, 1999, p. 22; Cohen & Galbraith, 1995, p. 101; Feiman-Nemser, 1996, p. 98; Kerka, 1998, p. 68; University of California, College of Education, 2006) there are few studies that explore teacher effectiveness and its relationship to Praxis and LaTAAP. Perhaps there is a need for investigating if there is a relationship between Praxis, LaTAAP, and teacher effectiveness. New teachers could make a substantive impact if they were allowed a forum in which to reveal their perceptions regarding LaTAAP as a way to retain new teachers in the system. These perceptions would impact individual school districts with regard to availability of qualified personnel.

Teacher attrition has long been a significant reason for implementing mentor programs internationally and throughout the United States (Evertson & Smithey, 2000, p.8; Feiman-Nemser, 1996, p. 112; Halford, 1998, p. 2; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). In a study comparing American and Israeli mentors, Clinard and Ariav (1998) suggested that “if mentoring experience involves learning new strategies and approaches to coaching, would not some of that knowledge ‘spill over’ in teaching children” (p. 101)? If new teachers can be encouraged to engage in reflective thinking about their mentoring practice, their professional teaching practice might become stronger as a result. New teachers often become consumed with the job at hand and the time constraints that bind them, leaving no time for reflection on their practice.

Since LaTAAP is touted to provide substantial benefits for both novice and mentor teachers, this reality has important implications for funding decisions made by administrators and staff development personnel (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006). Allowing new teachers and mentors to reveal their perceptions of their experience would assist administrators as they grapple with funding decisions related to

mentoring programs. Staff development personnel would also stand to benefit from this information as they make decisions concerning the types of professional development to provide for both novice and experienced teachers.

In summary, a qualitative study based on teachers' perceptions of their LaTAAP and Praxis experience would stand to benefit not only the teachers, but also the students, administrators, and staff developers who constitute our educational systems.

Definition of Terms

Andragogy

Andragogy is “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43).

LaTAP

The Louisiana Teacher Assessment Program consisted of a support semester and an assessment semester for novice teachers (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

LaTAAP

The Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program is a program designed to accommodate new teachers through mentoring and assessment (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

Phenomenological Study

A phenomenological study is a qualitative tradition of inquiry which describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals concerning a concept or a stated phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, p. 93).

Praxis

The Praxis is a series of tests developed by Educational Testing Service that provides tests and other services for states to use as a part of their teacher licensing and certification process (Educational Testing Services [ETS], 2005-2006). The sections of the test as it applies to elementary education teachers in Louisiana include Praxis I: Reading, Writing, and Mathematics and Praxis II: Principles of Learning and Teaching K-8 and Elementary Education Content Knowledge.

Protégé

A protégé is a person under the tutelage of a teacher mentor. Other frequently applied titles for a protégé include “new teacher”, “inductee”, “novice”, or “mentee” (Sweeny, 2001, p. xi).

Teacher Attrition

Teacher attrition is the course of action by which teachers leave the teaching profession (Feiman-Nemser, 1996).

Teacher Mentor

Teacher mentors for the purposes of this study are experienced Louisiana public school teachers (5 years or more) who have accepted the opportunity to enhance the training and professional development of new teachers (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

Teacher Mentoring

“The complex developmental process mentors use to support and guide their protégés through the necessary transitions that are a part of learning how to be effective educators and career-long learners” (Sweeny, 2001, p. xii).

TSR

The Team Summary Report is a multipage form on which ratings as well as rationales for ratings are recorded (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

Delimitations of the Study

The participants in this study consisted of LSUA graduates that are public school teachers who successfully completed LaTAAP during the last four years and passed Praxis.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation was that the number of participants was small due to time constraints and the qualitative nature of the study. While the participants involved in this qualitative study cannot generate the breadth of data required to represent all LaTAAP participants perceptions, they provided us with an insight into the experiences of public school teachers.

This study was also limited by my own close proximity to the topic of teaching and assessing. I am a trained and experienced external assessor for LaTAAP. I have also supervised student teachers in the education department at LSUA where the LCET form is used as an evaluation tool. The participants were responsive and eager to share their stories with someone whom they knew would be empathetic to their situation.

Summary

This study explored the experiences of beginning teachers. As evidenced by the literature, there is a need to discover if there is a relationship between LaTAAP, Praxis, and teacher effectiveness. This phenomenological study was framed by my own personal experiences as a teacher and an external assessor, an extensive review of

existing literature, and data gathering and analysis based on the lived experiences of the chosen participants.

Overview of the Study

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. The first chapter serves as a roadmap for the remainder of the study. The background and context of the problem is presented, along with my personal experiences, which leads to an interest in the problem. The purpose of the study, significance of and need for the study, definitions of terms and the delimitations and limitations recognized by the researcher are also included.

Chapter two presents an extensive review of literature that was found to be important to the study. This review shows how the literature made a contribution to understanding the research topic. It also reveals the existence of gaps in the literature and how the study addressed those gaps.

Chapter three presents a specific description of the research design, the purpose of qualitative research, and the methods of data collection and analysis that were utilized.

Chapter four provides an introduction to the participants and a detailed description of findings that emerged from analysis of the data.

Chapter five consists of the study's findings, conclusions, implications for mentoring theory and practice, and future research recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

The first-year teacher faces unique problems. The leap from college student to classroom practitioner is exceptionally wide. Teachers must not only be competent in their subject and know how to teach it, they must maintain a climate in which teaching and learning can take place. A teacher's personality is sufficiently exposed in teaching that his or her persona is almost transparent. This is a threatening, anxiety-producing situation for a novice, who is just beginning to establish a professional self-concept (Kramer, 2001, p. 411).

Newly licensed teachers are prepared to begin to teach, but they are not thoroughly proficient. They are also not ready to fine-tune their competence without assistance and support. A complete conception and a realistic awareness of being a teacher cannot be gained entirely, simulated exactly, or understood sufficiently in pre-service training. Even a superb student teaching experience lacks the completeness and the realism of a first teaching job (Silva, 2000).

According to Johnson (2001), teaching has been a career in which those with the least experience face the greatest challenges and most difficult responsibilities. This helps substantiate the belief espoused by our national, state, and local educational leaders that beginning teachers need a quality support system in order to achieve success during those "first few crucial years" of teaching (p.2).

Programs that provide support for beginning teachers move away from traditional practices in which new teachers generally assume full workloads that isolate them in their classrooms. According to some teacher reform advocates, this "sink or swim" practice

prevents new teachers from learning how to effectively link and adapt their knowledge and skills to specific expectations of the employing school district, school and classroom. Recent state-level induction programs for new teachers include support for up to two years. These programs often include orientation, formal mentors, peer networking, observations and assessments of instructional practice and classroom management, workshops and seminars (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 51).

New teachers face a multitude of challenges, especially in the face of an increased focus on accountability, the concurrent pressure to raise test scores, and the introduction of demanding standards-based curricula (Bauer & LeBlanc, 2002). New teachers often feel alone and that their college or university training has not prepared them for the reality of the classroom (Kramer, 2001); feelings of isolation and frustration are among the most-cited reasons new teachers leave the profession (Breux & Wong, 2003, p. 22). Many new teachers describe their experiences as ‘isolated, emotionally disconnected, and having no one to turn to’ (Mauer & Zimmerman, 2000, p.26).

Novice public education teachers walk into their classrooms on the first day, fully expected to perform the same job as veteran teachers. One-third of new teachers leave the profession within the first three years (Ingersoll, 2002, p. 3). While there are various aspects that play a significant role in the decision teachers make to leave the profession, 43% of those who change careers cite “inadequate support” as their primary basis (Jones & Pauley, 2003, p. 23).

The large number of new teachers entering the profession in the next few years will require significant types of support (Portner, 1998, p. 46). Teacher induction programs featuring some mentoring component have become an extremely popular

policy response to this need; about two-thirds of the states have mandated some form of mentor support for beginning teachers (Feiman-Nemser, 1996). The United States Department of Education (2004) reports that the number of public school teachers participating in new teacher induction or evaluation programs which often include mentoring has more than tripled during the last thirty years.

One of the most critical goals of professional development is to increase teacher effectiveness. New teachers are learners; in fact, they are on the very steepest part of their learning curves. Research suggests that what happens to beginning teachers during their early years on the job determines not only whether they stay in teaching but also what kind of teachers they become (Jipson and Paley, 2000, p. 38).

The Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program (LaTAAP) is a three-semester program that provides participating new teachers with a planned program of support while also providing a statewide measure of teacher competency for certification. The inclusion of a mentoring component in the LaTAAP program was specifically designed to provide assistance to new teachers through classroom visits and conferences in a formative rather than summative measure of evaluation (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002).

The LaTAAP program has two broad stages: the two assistance semesters and one assessment semester. New teachers are defined as those which have taught less than three years and hold type C certificates, those who hold temporary authorization to teach, teachers moving for the first time from Louisiana nonpublic schools to public schools, and new teachers from out of state who are unable to provide appropriate evaluation results from their immediate preceding employer (Bauer and LeBlanc, 2002). During the first semester, a mentor teacher is assigned to assist the new teacher in becoming a

competent, confident teacher within the framework provided by the Louisiana components of effective teaching. The evaluation team is made up of the mentor and the school principal or principal designee. During the third semester, the assessment team is made up of the mentor, the school's principal/designee, and an external assessor (Bauer & LeBlanc, 2002).

Classroom observations are used to gather data. Data collected by the assessment team is the basis for recommendation to the Louisiana Department of Education and the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education regarding the teacher's certification. During the third semester of employment, the administrator and the external assessor evaluate the certification candidate. From the evaluations the assessment team determines if the criteria for certification have been met based on the Revised Components of Effective Teaching. The four domains that are considered in the evaluation are planning, instruction, management, and professional development (Bauer & LeBlanc, 2002).

The Louisiana Mentor Program, one part of the state program, is designed to help a new teacher become a confident, competent professional in the classroom as quickly as possible and to offer support and assistance as he/she experiences first-year teaching. Local school districts compensate mentors who work with up to two novices per year. Districts match mentor teachers and novices by grade level and subject areas. New teachers in the program receive feedback regarding planning, classroom and instructional strategies; in-classroom observations with feedback in relation to the Louisiana Components of Effective teaching; and attention, support, and encouragement by mentor teachers (Louisiana Department Of Education [LDOE], 1998).

Beginning teachers need assistance with specific curricular issues within the context of their own classes and students. Many have the content knowledge, but lack the ability to translate the relevance of content instruction into achievable academic goals for their students. Valuable components to statewide induction programs include in-class coaching assistance and support to help beginning teachers to develop curriculum and lesson plans (Mullen, 2000, p. 4). School systems are finding that beginning teachers who have access to intensive mentoring are less likely to leave teaching (Trubowitz, 2004, p. 59).

Mentoring

Mentoring is a relationship in which a person of greater rank or expertise teaches, guides, and develops a novice in an organization or profession. The experience has an unusually beneficial effect on the protégé's personal and professional development (Darling-Hammond, 2004, p. 106).

Teacher mentoring programs are perceived as an effective staff development approach for beginning teachers. By establishing mentoring programs novice teachers get a strong start in their careers and experienced classroom teachers serving as mentors receive recognition and incentives. In education, mentoring is a complex, multidimensional process of guiding, teaching, influencing, and supporting new teachers (Koki, 1997, p. 6).

The terms mentoring, modeling, and coaching are often used interchangeably by educators. Functions of the mentor teacher vary according to the needs of the new employee, the goals of the mentoring program, and the local educational mentoring relationships. School districts must select and train mentors, match mentors and

protégés, set goals and expectations, and establish mentoring programs (Koki, 1997, p. 6).

Mentors may offer counsel, provide information, interpret cultural codes and practice, serve as role models, and act as advisers, guides, or advocates in a variety of formalized and less-formal contexts (Jipson and Paley, 2000, p. 37). Mentors must be good communicators who are respectful of the mentee and their beliefs regarding educational practice and theory. The mentor needs to encourage, motivate and challenge the mentee, helping them to grow to their utmost professional potential. The mentee, on the other hand, must also possess certain attributes for the relationship to be worthwhile, such as having a desire to work toward learning new instructional information, and an openness to different ideas and points of view (Jones & Pauley, 2003, p. 23).

Mentoring is an effective mechanism for one-on-one professional guidance and for cultivating a teaching culture in which expert teachers serve as an essential resource for new teachers. Such relationships are particularly useful for new teachers as they seek to develop effective teaching practices. A 1998 study by the U.S. Department of Education found that three out of five new teachers had been mentored by another teacher in the last year, suggesting that schools and/or teachers recognize the importance of such relationships early in a teacher's career. In addition, among the teachers who had been mentored within that time period, 45 percent with three or fewer years of teaching experience believed it improved their teaching a lot, compared with only 18 percent of teachers with 20 or more years' experience (Silva, 2000).

Schools need to train and support their mentors to be coaches who understand the elements of good teaching. They need to equip mentors and beginning teachers with a

learning curriculum so that they learn to analyze and improve classroom instruction. And they need to provide time and support for beginning teachers and mentors to work together effectively (Hirsh, Koppich, & Knapp, 1996, p. 22-25).

The mentorship needs to go beyond an exclusive focus on teaching techniques and curriculum development. Mentors must provide support to beginning teachers for all aspects of their job, including interacting with parents, finding stimulation from others and working with them to improve education within the school, appreciating their role as members of a professional community, dealing with students, and recognizing that teacher activity reaches beyond the narrow confines of the classroom (Trubowitz, 2004, p. 59).

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future noted that beginning teachers who receive mentoring become more effective as teachers because they are learning from guided practice rather than trial and error, and they leave teaching at much lower rates. Unfortunately, most beginning teachers never get mentoring support. In a recent national survey of teachers conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, while 70 percent of those who had been mentored by another teacher said that the experience significantly improved their teaching, less than one-fifth have received such guidance (Mullen, 2000, p. 114-115).

Only fifteen states require and finance mentoring for new teachers which is an increase of one in the past ten years (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification [NASDTEC], 1998). Similarly, only fifteen states require school districts to set aside professional-development time for all teachers (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification [NASDTEC],

1998). One way to produce good teachers and to keep them is to improve teacher professional development, starting with “induction” programs for beginning teachers (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification [NASDTEC], 1998). Effective induction programs are built around a well-defined learning curriculum, combining mentoring with high-quality professional development to help new teachers reflect on and improve their classroom practice (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification [NASDTEC], 1998).

In a study for the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington, researcher Richard Ingersoll found a 40 percent turnover rate among first-year teachers who did not participate in induction programs (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification [NASDTEC], 1998). This was more than twice the turnover rate of teachers who had received high-quality induction support (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification [NASDTEC], 1998).

Educational Testing Service’s (ETS) research found that experienced teachers who were trained as mentors worked with beginning teachers on critical aspects of teaching. Results show that high quality mentor-based induction programs can help improve teacher practices and bolster student achievement (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification [NASDTEC], 1998).

Although a great deal remains to be learned about mentoring, the evidence presented here indicates that mentoring relationships can be established or enriched by learning or encouraging mentor-like behavior rather than by selecting certain types of

people. Furthermore, it is not necessary to match pairs on various characteristics or to avoid cross-gender pairing. Therefore, the potential for many more individuals benefiting from these developmental relationships becomes a practical reality.

Tests and Teachers

Researchers have expressed serious concerns about the academic ability of teachers often citing the fact that high school seniors who intend to major in education have consistently earned lower scores on standardized tests than their college-bound peers. Students who profess an early interest in education traditionally lacked the academic abilities of students interested in other profession. One reason is because teaching has never received the respect and remuneration accorded most other occupations (Latham, Gitomer, & Ziomek, 1999, p. 24).

The U.S. Department of Education's draft guidance entitled "Improving Teacher Quality" reveals that the measure of a teacher is based on a single test. The draft guidance, which is in regard to the state grants under Title II of the No Child Left behind Act, makes no attempt to place teaching into a context most teachers would find compatible with their decision to choose the profession as a career. The law states that a "highly qualified teacher" is ready for the classroom once he or she has a bachelor's degree and state certification or has passed the state teacher licensing exam and "a rigorous state academic subject test." Teachers who obtain their training via "alternative" routes are considered highly qualified as beginning teachers provided they are being mentored and supervised in a program leading to certification (Lewis, 2003, p. 420).

More recent concerns about the teaching force are also commanding attention, including the growing demand for teachers and the gender and ethnic homogeneity of the

teacher workforce. Most predictions place the demand for new hires above two million over the next decade, or more than 200,000 teachers a year, far exceeding the number of potential teachers produced by colleges of education. Nearly nine out of ten public school teachers are white, and approximately three in four are female (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 1999, p. 35). The mismatch between the diverse population of students and the relatively homogeneous population of teachers makes it difficult for all students to have role models in school with whom they can readily identify (Latham, Gitomer, & Ziomek, 1999, p. 25).

The quality of the nation's public schools has become a predominant issue in political campaigns and in the media. Calls for education reform are widespread and there has been frequent legislative activity in all the states and in Congress to promote education change. While the primary focus of education reform in the 1980s and 1990s was the nation's elementary and secondary school students, the focus in recent years has been upon the teaching profession. The increasing interest in reforming the teaching profession has focused on the use of teacher tests and performance assessments to change the qualifications of the teaching force, to revise teacher preparation, and to impact the on-going professional development of educators (Pullin, 2001, p. 383).

Policymakers must look beyond the use of standardized tests to evaluate prospective elementary school teachers. School districts in the United States need thousands of new teachers each year. In elementary schools, mandates for reducing class size have created a widespread demand for teachers, particularly in urban schools that serve students from families below the poverty line. In the coming years, teacher retirements will create many more teaching vacancies. In order to assess prospective

teachers more fairly, policymakers must focus on using multiple evaluation measures and simultaneously keeping high standards, using authentic measures, aligning content assessments to the job, and differentiating teacher education by providing in-depth preparation in specific developmental levels (Nagel & Peterson, 2001, p. 46).

The Praxis Series are standardized examinations that provide measures of academic achievements and proficiencies for individuals entering or completing college or provisional teacher preparation programs and for individuals in professional areas (Educational Testing Services [ETS], 2005-2006).

Teacher Accountability in Other States

Many states have strengthened licensing standards in an effort to ensure that teachers are able to teach learners from different backgrounds and with various levels of preparation to meet challenging new content standards (Darling-Hammond, 2005, p. 238). According to ETS (2005-2006), twenty-six states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Department of Defense, and the Virgin Islands use Praxis I computer-based tests to screen teachers. Thirty-seven states and the District of Columbia use at least one test from either Praxis I or Praxis II. Composite scores for each state are calculated by summing the sub-scores for all three tests; however, not all states accept composite scores. According to ETS (2005-2006), the five states screening teacher candidates most stringently are Virginia, Vermont, Maryland, Georgia, and Arkansas. The five states with the lowest cut-scores are Montana, Mississippi, Louisiana, Nebraska, and Minnesota. Every candidate exiting an accredited teacher education program in Georgia takes Praxis II. Candidates who have completed an accredited program, but fail

Praxis II, may not be licensed in Georgia, thus nullifying approximately two years of college course work and a career path. According to ETS (2005-2006), Praxis II is intended to test teaching-field content knowledge, as well as general and subject specific pedagogical skills. Praxis II usually takes the form of a two-part, multiple-choice and essay test lasting four hours. Through this process, ETS decides who among Georgia's teacher education candidates will teach after four years of preparation (Wakefield 2003, p. 382).

Some states use Praxis III, which is taken during a beginning teacher's first year and is used to assess teaching practices. Intended for use in making certification decisions, these assessments are conducted in the classroom by local educators who use accepted standards to observe and evaluate a teacher's performance (Educational Testing Services [ETS], 2005-2006).

In California, where thousands of teaching vacancies will open during the coming years, all aspiring elementary school teachers must pass the Multiple Subjects Assessment for Teachers (MSAT), one of the Praxis II tests from the ETS. This test has high stakes. Teachers who have not taken the MSAT still get jobs. Districts can hire them as long as they agree to participate in appropriate workshops and prepare to take the test. Teachers cannot keep their jobs, however, if they do not eventually pass the test, and they cannot finish university preparation programs until they achieve the designated scores. Novice teachers must jump this important hurdle at the same time that they are working long day, learning new skills, and adapting to stressful circumstances in problem-ridden schools (Nagel & Peterson, 2001, p. 47).

The State of Maine has mandated that anyone applying for initial teacher certification must take and achieve qualifying scores on Praxis I PPST (University of Southern Maine, 2006). To enroll in certain education courses and be admitted to the Teacher Education Program at Indiana State University, candidates must pass the Praxis I exams (Indiana State University, 2006).

Admission Requirements

Each state has different set requirements for entering a college of education which includes grade point average (GPA), admissions tests and other criteria. Alaska has no state policy for GPA but candidates must take and pass Praxis I. Alabama has a required minimum GPA of 2.5 and must pass Praxis I. Arizona varies in that the state allows each individual institution to decide GPA and admissions tests. Arkansas has no state policy for GPA but must pass Praxis I. California allows each individual institution to determine GPA requirements but does require students to take and pass CBEST. Colorado varies due to the state giving each institution the decision on GPA requirements and admissions tests. Connecticut requires a “B” average and requires students to take and pass Praxis I. Delaware leaves the decision up to each institution. Florida requires a 2.5 GPA and Praxis I. Georgia requires a 2.5 GPA and allows the institution the decision for admissions tests although most require Praxis I. Hawaii and Idaho, have no state policy on either GPA or admissions tests. Illinois has no state policy on GPA but does require Praxis I. Indiana and Iowa must both take and pass Praxis I. Maine and Maryland both require a 2.5 GPA and passage of Praxis I. Massachusetts has no policy set for GPA or admissions tests. Michigan allows institutional decisions for

both areas. Minnesota has no set GPA but does require Praxis I. Mississippi requires a 2.5 GPA and passing Praxis I. Missouri requires a 2.5 GPA and requires passage of CBASE. Montana leaves the decision of both GPA and admissions tests to the individual institutions. Nebraska requires a 2.5 and Praxis I. Nevada has no state policy for GPA or admissions tests. New Hampshire and New Jersey both require a minimum 2.5 GPA and Praxis I. New Mexico has no GPA or admission tests policies. New York leaves the decision of GPA and admissions test to each institution. North Carolina requires a 2.5 GPA and passage of Praxis I. North Dakota has no state policy for admissions. Ohio requires a 2.5 for public institutions and a 2.0 for private institutions and Praxis I. Oklahoma requires a 3.0 in the last 20 hours of liberal arts and science classes and a passing score on Praxis I or OGET is required if GPA requirement is not met. Oregon leaves the decision for admissions to each individual institution. Pennsylvania requires a 3.0 GPA and has no state policy for admissions tests though most require Praxis I. Rhode Island allows each institution to determine admission requirements. South Carolina requires a minimum 2.5 GPA and a passing score on Praxis I. For admissions in South Dakota, a GPA of 2.5 is required but has no state policy for admissions tests. Tennessee requires a 2.5 GPA and passage of Praxis I. Texas, Utah, and Vermont allow their individual institutions to decide their admission requirements. Virginia requires a 2.5 GPA and passage of Praxis I. Washington has no state policy for GPA but does require a passing score on WEST-B. West Virginia allows each institution to determine the admission requirements. Wisconsin requires a 2.5 GPA and a passing score on Praxis I. Wyoming has no state policy on GPA or admission test. The District of Columbia has no

set GPA but does require Praxis I (National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, 2006).

TABLE 1

State	GPA	Admission Test(s)
Alaska	No	Praxis I
Alabama	2.5	Praxis I
Arizona	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Arkansas	No	Praxis I
California	Each individual institution decides GPA	CBEST
Colorado	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Connecticut	“B” average	Praxis I
Delaware	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Florida	2.5	Praxis I
Georgia	2.5	Praxis I
Hawaii	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Idaho	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Illinois	Each individual institution decides GPA	Praxis I
Indiana	Each individual institution decides GPA	Praxis I
Iowa	Each individual institution decides GPA	Praxis I
Louisiana	2.5	Praxis I
Maine	2.5	Praxis I
Maryland	2.5	Praxis I
Massachusetts	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test

Table 1, continued

Michigan	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Minnesota	Each individual institution decides GPA	Praxis I
Mississippi	2.5	Praxis I
Missouri	2.5	CBASE
Montana	Each individual institution decides GPA	Praxis I
Nebraska	2.5	Praxis I
Nevada	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
New Hampshire	2.5	Praxis I
New Jersey	2.5	Praxis I
New Mexico	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
New York	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
North Carolina	2.5	Praxis I
North Dakota	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Ohio	2.5	Praxis I
Oklahoma	3.0 in last 20 hours of liberal arts and science classes	Praxis I or OGET if GPA requirement is not met
Oregon	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Pennsylvania	3.0	Praxis I
Rhode Island	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
South Carolina	2.5	Praxis I
South Dakota	2.5	Each individual institution decides test
Tennessee	2.5	Praxis I

Table 1, continued

Texas	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Utah	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Vermont	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Virginia	2.5	Praxis I
Washington	Each individual institution decides GPA	WEST-B
West Virginia	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
Wisconsin	2.5	Praxis I
Wyoming	Each individual institution decides GPA	Each individual institution decides test
District of Columbia	Each individual institution decides GPA	Praxis I

Related Research

Pennington (2006) found that one-third to one-half of new teachers change careers before their fifth year. Novice teachers enter the classroom excited about teaching and expect that the students will be excited about learning (p. 13). Many new teachers are surprised to find out that for the most part this is not the case. They often become frustrated with students they can't seem to reach, lack of support from administrators, low salary, and limited appreciation from parents. Some of them begin to question if this is the field for them and leave the profession shortly after they begin. In 2000, Arkansas invested \$2.9 million in the Pathwise Mentoring/Classroom Observation System. The Pathwise System was developed by ETS to provide first-year teachers with a trained mentor. Arkansas did adopt the Pathwise System where mentors assist new teachers for their first three years (p. 13).

Scott (2001) conducted a study to examine a program with both mandatory mentoring and high-stakes performance-based assessments of new teachers. The results indicated that mentoring was beneficial whereas the high-stakes performance-based assessments failed to show evidence of effectiveness in many areas.

In 2003, the Ohio Department of Education trained 3,000 assessors to observe and determine whether first-year teachers would receive a professional teaching license. All new teachers must take Praxis III in which assessors observe and grade classroom performance. Teachers, retired teachers, district staff, and college faculty with K-12 experience may serve as an assessor (Darling-Hammond & Ifill-Lynch, 2006, p. 122).

In 2003, the National Education Association honored eight programs for successful mentoring programs that produce quality teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2005, p. 238). The winners focused on efforts to assist new teachers and their contribution to increased teacher-retention rates. Glendale Union High retained 90 percent of their first-year teachers. Participants attributed part of the program's success to the mentoring program. In Thousand Oaks, California the Conejo Peer Assistance and Review Program, which includes mentoring of new teachers, has retained 98 percent of new teachers. Canton, Ohio had only one out of 175 novice teachers to leave the teaching profession. The Plain Local Schools in Canton use a program that partners experienced teachers with new teachers for up to five years. In Fairfield, Ohio, new teachers must pass a "rigorous" state licensure exam. 97 percent of the novice teachers were retained. Youngstown City School District in Ohio was one of the first districts to establish a mentoring program using a state grant. The New Educators' Support Team pairs mentors

and new educators by building, subject-area, and grade level. 92 percent of these first year teachers were still employed and all but one participant passed Praxis III. In Illinois, Homewood-Flossmoor High improved from 36 percent to nearly 100 percent in just three years. Mentors were selected based on their enthusiasm and exemplary teaching skills. New teachers in Greenburg, Pennsylvania participated in a three-year mentor program. In six years only one new teacher left the profession. A mentoring program in Antigo, Wisconsin allowed mentors and mentees to earn graduate credits while pairing in a three-year curriculum (Loeb & Darling-Hammond, 2005, p. 239).

Nikos Bozionelos (2003) explored the practice of mentoring as it related with mentors' career successes, personalities, and the quality of mentoring the mentors themselves had received. The results suggested that mentoring has positive consequences for the mentors' careers and the quality of mentoring that the mentors themselves had received played a part in the quality of their current mentoring practice (p. 423).

As the aforementioned studies revealed, qualitative studies have shown to be an excellent fit for the investigation of mentoring. However, gaps in the literature are revealed when one seeks to find studies that examine the LaTAAP and Praxis. A qualitative study based on any relationships between public school teachers who completed LaTAAP and Praxis would stand to benefit not only the teacher, but also the mentors, administrators, students, and staff developers who constitute our educational systems.

CHAPTER THREE

Design and Methodology

Data were collected exclusively from a small group of Louisiana State University at Alexandria graduates who completed LaTAAP over the past four years. Follow-up questions for any responses requiring clarification were asked via individual email.

Organization of the Chapter

This chapter focuses on the study's methodological design. Sections of this chapter include the purpose of the study, research question, qualitative research rationale, pilot study, participant selection, design of the study, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was intended to address relationships by investigating the factors identified by novice teachers as influencing their performance on Praxis and LaTAAP.

Research Question

The central research question was developed based on an extensive review of literature, gaps in the research, interviews, and my own personal experiences as a trained external evaluator of LaTAAP. The central research question is:

What factors or issues are identified by novice teachers as influences on their performance in standardized assessments and classroom teaching effectiveness?

Treatment

The treatment is standard for all participants due to Louisiana policies and guidelines for teacher certification. Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment

Program (LaTAAP) is a state-mandated program with a wealth of materials designed to assist and support new teachers, mentors, and assessment teams (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006). LaTAAP emphasizes on ensuring success through mentoring and assisting new teachers. A long-range goal of the LaTAAP is to enhance student learning by providing teachers opportunities to strengthen skill areas and by identifying those aspects of teaching performance that may need improvement (Jefferson Parish Public Schools, 2006).

LaTAAP is a uniform statewide program for new teachers entering service for the first time in a Louisiana Public School System. It is the purpose of LaTAAP to provide new teaching employees of the public school systems with planned program of leadership and support from experienced educators during the most formative stages of a teacher's experience in Louisiana schools. LaTAAP provides a structured support program for new teachers and ensure that the alternative certification teacher understands and embodies the Louisiana Components of Effective Teachers. These components are considered the foundations for quality classroom instruction (University of Louisiana Monroe [ULM], 2006). It is further the purpose of LaTAAP to provide assurance to the state, prior to the issuance of a permanent Louisiana teacher certificate, that the new teaching employee demonstrates competency in the understanding and use of the Louisiana Components of Effective Teaching, determined by the state to be the basis for effective professional performance. These components of Effective Teaching are the basis of the assessment criteria.

The Louisiana Components of Effective Teaching are Louisiana's Teaching Standards for both new and experienced teachers. These Components have been

developed from the professional knowledge base on teaching and “craft knowledge” acquired by experienced educators. An advisory panel reviewed the professional knowledge base on teaching by examining research-based teacher assessment and evaluation documents from eight states (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

The LaTAAP program consists of four semesters: semester 1 includes Assistance; semester 2 also includes Assistance; semester 3 includes Assessment; and semester 4 includes Assistance (Jefferson Parish Public Schools, 2006). Through LaTAAP, each new teacher is assigned a mentor teacher who helps him or her transition into the career of education as successfully and effectively as possible (St. John the Baptist Parish Public Schools, 2006).

Each new teacher during the first semester and throughout the first two years of employment is provided a mentor who will lead professional development activities designed to enhance teacher competencies found to be essential to student learning. During the third semester of employment, the new teacher will also be assigned an assessment team consisting of the principal or principal’s designee and an assessor from outside the building. Data are collected by this assessment team as the basis for recommendations to the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) and the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education (SBESE) regarding the teacher’s certification. During the third semester, the mentor teacher will continue to provide a program of encouragement, support, and professional development. The mentor has no role or responsibility in the assessment process or the certification recommendation (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003, p. 78).

The assessment process should focus on the identification of patterns of behavior. The assistance process should focus on improvement of teaching performance as defined by the Louisiana Components of Effective Teaching (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003, p. 79).

During the new teacher's second semester of teaching, the principal, mentor, and the teacher will create a professional growth plan focused on the teacher's weaker Components and Attributes as defined through the mentoring process. The completed plan must be submitted as part of the new teacher's portfolio (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Training Manual, 2002-2003, p. 80).

Professional development planning begins with the Assistance Period and continues throughout the new teacher's career. The plan developed during the Assistance Period will be submitted and rated as part of the new teacher's portfolio. Every new teacher has a second Professional Growth Plan at the conclusion of the Assessment Semester, regardless of the certification recommendation (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Training Manual, 2002-2003, p. 80).

The Louisiana mentor program constitutes one part of the LaTAAP which is designed to help the new teacher become a competent, confident professional in the classroom as quickly as possible and to offer support and assistance as they meet the performance standards established as a criterion for certification. Although the assessors will provide some assistance to the new teacher during the assessment semester, it is the two-year mentoring process that constitutes the Assistance Period. The mentoring program is designed to help the new teacher become a competent, confident professional in the classroom as quickly as possible and to assist the new teacher in meeting the

performance standards established as a criterion for certification (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

At the beginning of the teacher's first year of experience in a Louisiana public school classroom, they are assigned a mentor teacher by the building principal or school system. That mentor provides a variety of support and technical assistance throughout the first two years. The mentor is not an assessor, but uses the same data collection instruments or forms and procedures as assessors use to help the new teacher analyze instruction and improve instructional performance (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

A mentor is an experienced teacher who has accepted the opportunity to enhance the training and professional development of a new teacher in LaTAAP. The mentor teacher plays a vital role in getting the new teacher ready to be an effective teacher. The State Teacher Assistance and Assessment process is a vehicle to enable the new teacher to become effective. The mentor is not an assessor of the new teacher. The mentor offers the new teacher opportunities to share and to learn with an experienced colleague. The exchange between mentor and new teacher is confidential (Jefferson Parish Public Schools, 2006).

During the second year, the new teacher will also be assigned an assessment team consisting of the principal or principal designee and an assessor from outside the building. Each assessor will visit once to collect data upon which to base the team's certification recommendation. In the event two members are in disagreement over the certification recommendation and the disagreement cannot be resolved, the Local Education Agency (LEA) Contact Person will appoint a third assessor external to the

school. The mentor has no role or responsibility in the assessment process or the certification recommendation (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003, p. 92).

Mentors and new teachers should be matched by grade level and subject areas, when possible. Regular education teachers should be paired, and special education teachers should be paired. Mentors should be accessible to the new teacher by teaching in the same building or having flexible schedules (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

The formal roles of a mentor are to coach, model, and to serve as a professional development specialist (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003). Those who serve as mentors to Louisiana's new teachers must themselves be competent, caring teachers. Rigorous and comprehensive training as mentors and assessors is essential for the mentor. The mentor must have excellent communication and interpersonal skills and must be fair, objective, honest, and ethical (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003).

The two basic uses of the assessment system of LaTAAP are first to develop information about the new teacher's competence that can be used to structure instructional improvement activities and second to develop information upon which sound decisions about the new teacher's qualifications for certification can be based. The assessment system is used in an advisory manner by the mentor and the principal during the second semester of a teacher's employment to develop a profile of strengths and needs that is then used to assist the new teacher in their professional development.

During the new teachers third semester of employment, the system is used to collect data and the assessment team recommends either certification or continuation in the assistance and assessment program. If a new teacher is recommended to continue in the assistance and assessment program and does not demonstrate competence by the end of the fourth semester they will be denied regular certification ([Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], 2006).

The long-range goal of the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program is to enhance student learning by providing to teachers opportunities to strengthen skill areas and by identifying those aspects of teaching performance that may need improvement. This approach to professional development is the key to improving teacher performance (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003).

If a new teacher is recommended to continue in the assistance and assessment program, assistance and assessment are continued in accordance with the pattern used in the third semester. A new teacher who does not demonstrate competence by the end of the fourth semester will be denied regular certification and will have to leave teaching in Louisiana public schools for at least two years (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003).

Table 2

NEW TEACHER ASSESSMENT PROCESS

<p><u>Assessor A</u></p> <p>Informal Conference Observation Post Conference Portfolio Scoring</p>	<p><u>Assessor B</u></p> <p>Informal Conference Observation Post Conference Portfolio Scoring</p>
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<p><u>Assessor Team Meeting</u></p> <p>Team Summary Report Areas for Improvement</p>

<p><u>Teacher Summary Conference</u></p> <p>Share summary report; Share certification Recommendation; and Develop PGP</p>
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<p><u>Assessor C</u> (when agreement is not reached)</p> <p>Informal Conference Observation Post Conference Portfolio Scoring</p>	<p><u>Assessor Team Meeting</u></p> <p>Team Summary Report Areas for Improvement</p>
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Louisiana Department of Education, Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003.

During the assistance period, assessors will provide assistance to the new teacher. This assistance takes place during the assessment semester for a two-year period. This mentoring program assists new teachers to become effective and confident professionals in the classroom. The assistance process should focus on improvement of teaching performance as defined by the Louisiana Components of Effective Teaching. It also helps new teachers achieve certification (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003).

All new teachers will develop a Professional Growth Plan (PGP) as part of their first year assistance period. The PGP is an effort put forth by the mentor, the principal, and the new teacher. After the principal and the mentor observe the new teacher, the PGP may be formulated. The PGP is a vital section of the new teacher's portfolio (Louisiana Department of Education [LDOE], Professional Development Manual, 2002-2003).

Some benefits new teachers will receive are feedback regarding planning, classroom, and instructional strategies; an in-depth understanding of LaTAAP; additional in-classroom observations with feedback in relation to the Louisiana Components of Effective Teaching; positive attention, support, and encouragement; and reassurance that they are developing professionally (Jefferson Parish Public Schools, 2006).

Praxis – Standardized Assessment

The Praxis is a series of tests developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS) that provides tests and other services for states to use as a part of their teacher licensing and certification process. Some colleges and universities use the Praxis Series assessments to evaluate individuals entering teacher education programs. Professional

associations and organizations may also require the Praxis Series as a criterion for professional licensing decisions (The Praxis Series Bulletin, 2005-06).

The Praxis Series is developed by educators for educators. Advisory committees of distinguished teachers, teacher educators, key administrators, and professional organizations help determine test content and review, revise, and approve all questions and exercises. The Praxis Series is grounded in current research, including a complete job analysis of the most important tasks and skills required of beginning teachers and extensive surveys to confirm test validity (Educational Testing Services [ETS], 2005-2006).

The Praxis Series includes two types of assessments that correspond in the development of a teacher. The first assessment milestone is used to determine entrance into a teacher-training program. The second milestone is to obtain a license to teach (The Praxis Series Bulletin, 2005-06). The tests include content-specific tests, pedagogical tests, and basic skills tests. The Praxis tests are developed to measure specific content and pedagogical skills and knowledge for beginning teaching practice. The Praxis Series assessments are designed to be comprehensive and inclusive (The Praxis Series Bulletin, 2005-2006).

For each test, a job analysis survey is conducted to determine what a representative group of teachers and teacher educators believe that a newly licensed or certified teacher of a particular subject or grade level should know in order to perform his or her job competently. Based on the job analysis as well as any national disciplinary standards that may apply, an Advisory Committee of teachers and teacher educators defines the content areas that should be covered on the test, and then creates

specifications to guide the development effort (Educational Testing Services [ETS], 2005-2006).

Test development specialists and practicing teachers use this information to develop test questions. Once developed, the questions undergo a series of reviews conducted by the Advisory Committee, content experts, and ETS staff to confirm that they cover the content defined in the test specifications. At every step in the test development process, ETS follows well-established industry procedures and standards to assure that the test is measuring what it is intended to measure. This iterative process creates clear links between the skills and knowledge being measured and content of the test (Educational Testing Services [ETS], 2005-2006).

Praxis I: Pre-Professional Skills Tests (PPST) is intended to be taken early in a candidate's college career to measure basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics skills. The PPST features multiple-choice items in Reading and Mathematics. The Writing test includes both multiple-choice questions and an essay section. PPST is available in two formats including paper-based and computer-based. The Praxis II: Subject Assessments is taken by every candidate exiting an accredited teacher education program in the state where Praxis is required. Praxis II measures your content knowledge of the subjects you will teach. The Praxis II: Subject Assessments include four areas of testing including Specialty Area Tests, Multiple Subject Assessment for Teachers (MSAT), Principles of Learning and Teaching (PLT), and Teaching Foundations. The Specialty Area Tests are multiple-choice and constructed-response items that measure general and subject-specific teaching skills and knowledge. MSAT was developed to assess knowledge and high-order thinking skills of prospective elementary school

teachers. PLT uses a case study approach with constructed-response and multiple-choice items to measure pedagogical knowledge at grade levels. The Teaching Foundations Tests feature constructed-response and multiple-choice items to assess pedagogy in multi-subjects (The Praxis Series Bulletin, 2005-2006). A minimum Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) score of 1,000, with at least 480 verbal and 520 math, exempts a candidate from PRAXIS I. PRAXIS II usually takes the form of a two-part, multiple-choice and essay test lasting four hours (Wakefield, 2003, p. 384).

Praxis I is the first high-stakes hurdle for those considering teaching. Test questions focus on ones ability to make decisions about relationships in data, sentence structure errors, and paragraph organization. This poses few problems for the average Asian-American or European-American candidate; however, the average African American or average Latin American may face problems in Praxis I (Educational Testing Services [ETS], 2005-2006).

Students from historically disadvantaged school districts are not getting the same education as those from historically affluent districts. Evertson and Smithey (2000) predicted that candidates from the South's "Black Belt" would be fortunate to graduate from high school under new test-for-promotion reforms, much less qualify for candidacy in teacher education programs (p. 8). Praxis I blocks the entry into teacher education for many minority and low-income candidates, while Praxis II blocks the exit. If education programs earn licensure rights according to their Praxis II pass rate, we can expect schools serving disadvantaged populations to discontinue teacher education as well as a decrease in diversity among teachers (Creswell, 1998, p. 57).

Nearly 80 percent of states that include tests as part of their teacher licensure process rely on The Praxis Series. The Praxis Series and related assessments are designed to be used principally in connection with other criteria by state authorities for the purpose of licensing education professionals. Test scores used to inform such credentialing decisions must be supported by appropriate validity evidence. ETS employs a comprehensive validation process for this test score use that is consistent with best practices (Educational Testing Services [ETS], 2005-2006).

The Praxis Series is currently required for teacher licensure in 44 states and U.S. jurisdictions. These tests are also used by several professional licensing agencies and by several hundred colleges and universities. Because The Praxis Series tests are used to license teachers in many states, teacher candidates can test in one state and submit their scores for licensure in any other Praxis user state (The Praxis Series Bulletin, 2005-2006).

ETS ensures Praxis tests are valid and fair by determining the connection between the content of a test and the knowledge and/or skills judged important for entry-level practice. This is accomplished through multiple means, beginning with a systematic analysis of job requirements. This analysis involves obtaining the input of representative samples of educators and reviewing national disciplinary standards. Committees of educators then work with ETS's subject experts to conduct reviews for the appropriateness and fairness of test content. The process culminates with passing-score or standard-setting studies conducted by each state or licensing agency, during which the job relatedness of the test content for the state's entry-level teachers is evaluated (The Praxis Series Bulletin, 2005-06).

Qualitative Research

Creswell (1998) describes qualitative research as giving up an authoritative stance by no longer professing to know everything but claiming to know something in an effort to “ever hope to speak authentically of the experiences of the other” (p. 577). Lincoln and Guba (1985) also suggest four underlying paradigms for qualitative research: positivism, post-positivism, critical theory, and constructivism (p. 17). Glesne (1999) suggest three paradigms: positivist research, interpretive research and critical research (p. 33). An interpretive approach, (phenomenological approach), will be applied to this study in an attempt to understand the program phenomena through the meanings of the teachers who participated in LaTAAP. Interpretive studies generally attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them. This method of research is “aimed at producing an understanding of the context of the information system, and the process whereby the information system influences and is influenced by the context” (Creswell, 1998, p. 34-35).

Qualitative researchers’ knowledge is always partial because it is situated in a particular (historical) context, with the reasonable hope that the description and analysis of the complexities of a study will identify concepts not previously seen or fully appreciated. “The qualitative researcher is sometimes described as a translator of culture” (Glesne, 1999, p. 156). The researcher, who serves as an objective middleperson, works to understand and translate the lives of others in a meaningful account. Qualitative researchers’ interpretations depend on their own experiences, knowledge and theoretical dispositions, and collected data to present their understanding

of research participant's experiences by developing a sense of meaning in their own lives (Glesne, 1999, p. 157-158).

Participant Selection

The Chair of the department of Education at LSUA was asked to identify participants who were currently teaching, had passed all required components of Praxis, and had participated in LaTAAP during the past four years, and current. Fourteen potential participants for the study were identified. Of the fourteen identified teachers, ten responded to the initial letter agreeing to participate in the study. Confidentiality was assured to all participants, an introductory letter (see Appendix A) and a consent form (see Appendix B) were presented to participants at the outset of the data gathering process. All ten teachers completed all interviews and focus groups conducted in the study.

Design of the Study

Phenomenological Methodology

A phenomenological approach was applied because it alone among qualitative research methodologies (biography, phenomenological study, grounded theory study, ethnography, and case study (Creswell, 1998, p. 101) focuses on "experience and understanding" (Imel, et al., 2000, p. 4). "Phenomenology has been referred to as a philosophy, a paradigm, a methodology, and equated with qualitative methods of research and naturalistic enquiry" (Patton, 1989, p. 68). Data were collected through interviews and focus groups. Both of these are acceptable phenomenological methodologies (Spiegelberg, 1976, p. 12; Vankaam, 1966, p. 44; and Giorgi, 1971, p. 14).

Phenomenologist must put themselves in the place of others (Hilton, 2002, p. 249). “A phenomenological study focuses on the essence or structure of an experience” (Merriam, 1983, p. 166). Inner experiences are compared and analyzed to identify the essences of the phenomenon being studied. Phenomenological philosophy is philosophical criticism “characterized by the universality which criticism is systematically practiced” (Weiss, 1994, p. 88) and criticism “in the systematically adopted attitude of disengagement” (Imel, 2000, p. 19).

Phenomenology - History

Phenomenological research, based on the philosophies of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Kerry & Armour, 2000, p. 16), was defined in 1931 by Husserl as a descriptive analysis of the essence of pure consciousness. Phenomenology, according to Husserl, “must claim to be ‘first’ philosophy and to offer the means for carrying out every possible critique of reason” (Husserl, 1971, p. 78) while also serving as a theoretical discipline (Weiss, 1994, p. 63). Husserl developed three key ideas or common themes of phenomenology: meaning, consciousness, and intentionality (Husserl, 1931, p. 42). Husserl called upon phenomenologist to “set aside all previous habits of thought” and “learn to see what stands before our eyes” (1931, p. 43) while viewing “intentionality” as creating the assumption that we are always engaged in the world (Willis, 1996, p. 334). Heidegger (1954), a student of Husserl, felt that Husserl’s thinking was trapped by its relationship to a concept of God and the transcendent (p. 1). While Husserl thought philosophy to be a scientific discipline that had to be founded on a phenomenology understood as epistemology, Heidegger radically changed this view. Instead of taking phenomenology as “prima philosophia” (Heidegger, 1954, p.2) or

foundational discipline, Heidegger took it as a metaphysical ontology: He believed that phenomenological inquiry involves “thrusting aside our interpretative tendencies...because these tendencies conceal the entities...we encounter...of their own accord in our concern with them” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 96. According to Heidegger, philosophy was not at all a scientific discipline but more fundamental than science itself (1954). He believed that modern philosophy had forgotten the question of being (“is-ness”) and being as the subject of discourse or self-direction (p. 4). Therefore, phenomenology must be interpretive because truth is both concealing and revealing (Heidegger, 1954, p. 5). Phenomenology emerged, in the early 1960’s, as an educational research methodology (Vandenberg, 1987, p. 1) due to a strong move to an interpretive or qualitative approach (Burns, 1992, p. 2). Educational administration researchers, such as Vandenberg (1971) utilized phenomenological methodologies to investigate educational administration phenomena (Gronn, 1983, p. 4).

Data Collection

The data gathering techniques that were used in this study consisted of individual interviews and focus groups. The individual interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length. The focus groups were approximately 90 minutes in length. The interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed into written format.

The individual interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to reveal demographic details of the participants. The questions were informed by the literature, revealed gaps in the literature, the personal experiences of the teachers, and my own personal mentoring experiences. Participants were encouraged to reflect upon their past educational and personal experiences which inspired them to become teachers. It became

obvious during the initial interview that the teachers were interested in and emotional about both their Praxis experience and the mentoring component of LaTAAP. These factors contributed to a very direct response to all questions resulting in confident reflections of relevant issues.

The focus group interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed to reveal the personal reflections of the participants as they relived their mentoring experiences through their story telling. The goal of the focus groups was to become a flexible tool to elicit perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas of the participants from a wide range of perspectives. Each person’s point of view was heard and encouragement was given to participants to express different points of view. The focus groups were utilized to encourage interaction not only between the researcher and the participants, but also among the participants themselves. The group format offered support for individual participants and encouraged greater openness in their responses (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996, p. 59).

The following table illustrates the purpose of the interviews and focus groups and sample questions used.

Table 3

Purposes and Questions of Interviews and Focus Groups

PURPOSE	QUESTIONS
<p>Interview – The purpose of the interview is to reveal demographic details of the participants, participants’ past educational and personal mentors, and participants’ experiences which inspired them to become teachers.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Why did you decide to become a teacher? 2. How long have you been in the teaching profession? 3. Tell me about any mentors who influenced/assisted you. 4. Were there any factors, issues or variables that may have affected your

Table 3, continued

	<p>Praxis scores? If so, please explain.</p> <p>5. Were there any factors, issues or variables that may have affected your LaTAAP score? If so, please explain.</p> <p>6. How would you describe your teaching experiences?</p> <p>7. How would you describe your experiences of being mentored?</p>
<p>Focus Group 1 –</p> <p>The purpose of focus group 1 is to elicit the reflections of the participants with regard to the impact of the mentoring experience on their teaching methods and roles as teachers.</p>	<p>1. Have you gained new insights into your professional practice by being mentored?</p> <p>2. How has the mentoring experience directly impacted your teaching methods?</p> <p>3. How has the mentoring experiences impacted your understanding of the roles of teachers?</p>
<p>Focus Group 2 –</p> <p>The purpose of focus group 2 is to debrief participants, present findings, provide opportunity for verification of findings, and provide opportunity for suggestions for further research.</p>	<p>1. Are the findings that I have presented to you correct and valid?</p> <p>2. Is there any part of the findings which you feel could be problematic to your personal lives or professional practice?</p> <p>3. Do you have any suggestions for further research?</p>

Trustworthiness

The credibility of findings and interpretations of findings depend upon one’s careful attention to establishing trustworthiness (Glesne, 1999, p. 90). Trustworthiness is a term that reflects research validity. It is an issue that should be thought about during research design as well as in the midst of data collection (Glesne, 1999, p. 97-98).

Trustworthiness was shown through examination and review of previous studies that held similar research approaches and methods. Several qualitative research studies with phenomenological approaches were cited and investigated in the *Design of the Study* section of this chapter. Citation and discussion of these studies aided in validating and

upholding the trustworthiness of the qualitative design and phenomenological approach which were chosen as the basis for this investigative study.

Weiss (1994) stated that “qualitative interviews regularly bring the ordinarily private into view” (p. 121). With this admission into the private lives of participants, it was imperative to establish interview protocol before the process began. Application was made to the University of New Orleans Committee on the Use of Human Subjects and approval was given before the participants were interviewed. Participants were assured of confidentiality. The participants were assured that the interview process is a non-threatening situation and one in which they could stop at any time. Participants were encouraged to share truthfully. It is reasonable to assume, however, that if participants want to keep certain events or behaviors to themselves, they would certainly have done so. Every effort was made to establish a good interviewing partnership with participants based on trust, confidentiality, and rapport was practiced by the interviewer. This partnership was one of the best guarantees of the validity of the interview process and also helped to establish the trustworthiness of the study.

Subjectivity has long been considered something which one desires to keep out of research. Qualitative researchers, however, have begun to claim that subjectivity, when recognized, “can be monitored for more trustworthy research and can contribute to research” (Glesne, 1999, p. 105). According to Glesne (1999), reflecting on one’s own autobiography and the way it intersects with the research topic contributes to the control of subjectivity and the utilization of it within the study (p. 106).

Trustworthiness in this study was verified through debriefing of participants. This was accomplished through a focus group meeting held at the conclusion of the data

gathering process. The participants were asked to verify that their perspectives were reflected. They were also asked to inform the researcher of any part of the research that they felt could be problematic to their personal lives or professional practice.

In conclusion, a peer debriefer was utilized to enhance the validity of the study and promote trustworthiness. The peer debriefer was asked to review the study periodically, asking questions and raising concerns when necessary. The addition of external reflection by a person outside the research arena provided “an external check of the research process” (Creswell, 1998, p. 202) and also provide invaluable assistance to the researcher.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data began with transcription of the audiotapes from the individual interviews. Rather than have the participants complete a lengthy specified demographic form, participant responses to interview questions provided the necessary information to develop an appropriate descriptive summary of each participant. With Praxis and LaTAAP as the focal points of the study, the questioning created limited parameters to participant responses. Praxis generated concise, opinionated responses nearly universal in nature. Their mentor and the mentoring process were readily recognized as the common themes for all participants when asked about LaTAAP.

The interviews set the stage for the subsequent focus groups as open-ended questions were developed partially from information gained during the individual interviews and supported by previously reviewed literature. Results of the interviews revealed strong opinions related to the standardized testing experiences while providing only a basis for investigation of the impact of mentoring on their lives. Three questions

emerged consistent with the intended purpose of the first focus group: to elicit reflections of the participants with the regard to the impact of the mentoring experience on their teaching methods and roles as teachers.

The final focus group was designed as a means of debriefing participants and providing an opportunity for verification of findings. Participants were provided with a copy of their participant profile and an eight page summary of the study findings. All participants accepted their profile as valid, agreed with the findings of the study, and offered only a few suggestions for future research.

Summary

Information gathered in this study began with a foundational belief that specific factors or issues would be identifiable by novice teachers as impacting their performance on various forms of assessment. Through individual interviews and focus group, information was pursued on a personal level to identify those factors or issues. In spite of the open-endedness of the questioning, participants provided a narrow, linear path to factor identification.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Introduction

This chapter introduces the participants of this study and relates their personal reflections with regard to their Praxis and LaTAAP experiences. Their unique stories are described through their own words and show the significance that each participant places on the various aspects and components of their teaching practice.

This chapter also discusses the commonalities of the participants' Praxis and LaTAAP experiences and the factors impacting those experiences. These commonalities were discovered as coding and analysis of the data occurred. Themes revealed through this process included issues concerning professional growth, mentor training, testing and personal effects of LaTAAP.

Meeting the Participants

Nancy

Nancy realized early in her life that she wanted to be a teacher. Her family consists of many teachers so she decided to follow in those teachers' footsteps. She has been teaching for four years. After receiving her B.S. degree in elementary education, she attended graduate school and earned a Master's degree in Library Science. She currently teaches third grade in a rural elementary school in central Louisiana.

Nancy had high passing scores on Praxis. She passed all three sections of Praxis the first time she took the exam. Nancy's GPA was a 3.975 therefore her high scores were expected. She also was selected as the best student teacher while attending undergraduate school.

Nancy completed all requirements for LaTAAP with no problems. She spoke of mentors who influenced her:

A college professor at LSUA, had a passion for learning and teaching that spilled over into me. She had a love for the children and for the career. My student teaching mentor also had a positive influence on me. She too was in love with teaching. She was an excellent mentor. By student teaching under her leadership I was able to see theory put into action.

Nancy now serves as a student teacher mentor and as a LaTAAP mentor. She has participated in the mentoring program since her initial training. She has participated as a mentee and as a mentor. She stated that LaTAAP meets the needs of mentee teachers.

Nancy stated:

Through LaTAAP, I had a wonderful mentor. I cannot imagine going through my first year without my LaTAAP mentor. She was my rock. I went to her for questions, answers, and guidance. LaTAAP kept me afloat during this unsure and scary time in my career.

Nancy said that both of her mentees have been in the same areas of teaching. She plans to continue mentoring. She spoke of how LaTAAP is really making a positive difference in the lives of new teachers.

Jeri

Jeri did not have teaching in mind as a profession while she was growing up. She was very interested in sports and medicine and thought of becoming a pharmacist. It was through the influence of a high school coach who was also one of her teachers that Jeri decided to major in education. She received her college degree in Elementary Education with an Early Childhood add-on certification. She has been teaching pre-school for four years. She currently teaches in a pre-k through 12 school in central Louisiana. Jeri has been a LaTAAP mentor for one year.

Jeri had some trouble passing Praxis. Even though she graduated with a 3.5 GPA she failed Praxis the first two times she took it. She was persistent and eventually passed the exam. Jeri said that she never has done well on standardized tests. She stated that she has a phobia and experiences true test anxiety when it comes to these types of exams.

Jeri completed all requirements for LaTAAP her first try. She stated:

I know that I'm a good teacher. Praxis is a money making gimmick. There is no way for a test to determine if one will be a good teacher. LaTAAP is much more accurate. You are actually teaching children while being mentored and evaluated. LaTAAP allows you to put theory into practice. LaTAAP is a much more accurate tool to determine teacher effectiveness than Praxis.

Jeri stated that she had a wonderful LaTAAP mentor. She helped plan her units for the week and guided her through the teaching process. Jeri said she feels like teaching is what God wants her to do and it brings joy to her life.

Melanie

Beginning in her high school years, Melanie began to realize that she wanted to become a teacher. "I felt like I would be interested in trying to be an influence for students – an individual that they would want to be like or see as an example". One of her high school teachers played an important role in helping her realize her future profession. As Melanie watched this teacher interact with the students, she "saw the way that she was able to handle students and be helpful to them – giving them a reason to be respectful and to behave". Upon completing high school, Melanie left for college with her future profession firmly decided. She would become a teacher.

Melanie graduated from college with a degree in Elementary Education. Her first job was as a first grade teacher. Since then, she has taught second and fourth grade. She

is presently teaching second grade for a pre-k through 4 school in southwest Louisiana. She has been teaching a total of four years.

Melanie passed Praxis the first time taking it with no problem. She graduated with a 2.856 GPA, slightly above the minimum requirement for education majors, but she scored high on Praxis. She said that all through school she never had a high GPA but always seem to test well on standardized tests.

Melanie did struggle somewhat with LaTAAP in the beginning. She contributes her success in LaTAAP to her mentor. She stated that “without my mentor I’m not sure I would have lasted the entire first year”.

Melanie’s positive attitude toward LaTAAP began during her first year of teaching. Her assigned mentor was very helpful and Melanie “was very confident that if I had a problem or question, I could go to her and she would answer it”. Melanie saw mentoring as “something very beneficial”. She shared that she was “glad I had that as a new teacher”. After her successful experience with LaTAAP, Melanie began to investigate the requirements to become a mentor. She spoke to her principal about her desire to become a mentor and her wish was granted. Her principal asked her to become a mentor and attend mentor training.

Joe David

Joe David decided early in his childhood that he wanted to teach physical education. He loved all sports and any type of physical activity. He attended LSUA and obtained a degree in Education.

Joe David's dream of becoming a physical education teacher came true. He began teaching at a rural school in central Louisiana. He now teaches grades Pre-K through 6. He has been teaching for three years.

Joe David had to take Praxis twice. He failed Praxis the first time he took it but passed his second go around. Joe David typically scored well on standardized tests so he was surprised when he did not pass it the first time. His college GPA was a 3.233.

Joe David said his experience with LaTAAP was pleasant. His LaTAAP mentor was his eighth grade teacher. The two of them had fun reminiscing. Joe David stated "my experience with LaTAAP was most helpful and enlightening". He too, stated that the first year would have been overwhelming had it not been for the help of his mentor. He said, "my mentor showed me ways to stay organized". Joe David has a desire to become a LaTAAP mentor in the near future. He wants to teach another year or two before making that a reality.

Lacie

Lacie began to have feelings about her future in the teaching profession in the seventh or eighth grade. She asserted that teaching is a calling from God and she strongly believes she was called to teach. By the time Lacie reached high school, she had decided to become an early childhood teacher. She attended college and obtained a degree in Elementary Education with an add-on in Early Childhood Education. Lacie passed Praxis on her first try. Lacie graduated with a perfect 4.0 and has always done extremely well with standardized tests.

Lacie began her teaching career in an inner-city school in Louisiana. She taught kindergarten for two years and is currently teaching Pre-k. Lacie has been in the teaching profession for three years.

Lacie stated:

LaTAAP helped me to gain new insights into my professional practice by being mentored. The mentoring experiences impacted my understanding of my role as a teacher. My mentor helped with time management, discipline, and planning. I probably could have survived without LaTAAP but I would not have wanted to try.

Lacie plans to become a LaTAAP mentor in the next couple of years. She asserted that LaTAAP is making a positive difference in the teaching profession.

Kate

When Kate was a child, she remembered playing with siblings, other relatives, and friends, pretending she was a teacher. She loved school and said that being a teacher has always been in the back of her mind. She candidly admitted, however, that teaching began to really appeal to her when she got older and began to think about a profession that would allow her to be with her children. She stated that “as a mother, it was an ideal job”.

Kate began college, but soon dropped out when the first of her three children began to arrive. When her youngest child was four years old, Kate decided to return to college. She went to school three days a week. Kate worked very hard to earn her B.S. in Elementary Education. She acknowledged that she had to study late at night or early in the morning while her three children were sleeping. Defying all odds, Kate graduated and is so proud of her accomplishments.

Kate has taught for four years. Her first two years were spent teaching second grade. She loved teaching second grade but her principal asked her to move to fourth grade. Kate's principal thought that she was a strong teacher and the school needed her for LEAP preparation.

Passing Praxis was not a problem for Kate. She passed the exam on her first attempt. Kate was a little apprehensive going into the exam. She had not scored as well as she desired on the ACT. Her college GPA was a 2.68.

Kate was excited to get started with LaTAAP. She met all areas for LaTAAP certification. Kate stated:

My mentor works very well with the new teachers in LaTAAP. She was very open with me and I felt she really cared. She made sure I stayed on top of my assignments and that they were completed to the best of our abilities. I was very comfortable working with her and I know she will be there if and when I need her.

In the near future, Kate intends to become a LaTAAP mentor. She stated that LaTAAP is having a positive impact on the lives of teachers and students.

Beth

As Beth was growing up, she had more challenges than the average child. Both of Beth's parents were deaf. She not only had to learn to speak English but also American Sign Language. Beth's parents were also much older than her friend's parents. Her mother was forty and her father was forty-three when she was born.

Beth always knew she wanted to be a teacher. She has two older sisters who are in the education field. One is an elementary teacher and the other is a middle school administrator. Beth stated:

The main reason I became a teacher is my love for children. I enjoy working with the children, learning their personalities, and to hopefully be a positive influence in their lives. I feel that becoming an educator is one of my greatest accomplishments. I hope to one day have a family and I feel this is a great profession for a mother.

Beth received a degree in Elementary Education and has been teaching fifth grade for three years at a rural school in central Louisiana. She had to take Praxis twice after missing the passing score by two points her first attempt.

She knew that she would be a successful teacher even though she had to take Praxis twice. She is in favor of LaTAAP stating “I don’t think I would have survived the first year without my mentor. LaTAAP is crucial for beginning teachers”.

Alice

As Alice was growing up, she always thought she wanted to become a nurse. Following high school graduation, she first began her college career in nursing. Alice made it through her course work and all the way to clinicals before deciding nursing was not what she wanted to do. She did not enjoy being in hospitals and she found out quickly that she had a weak stomach for some of the conditions surrounding nursing responsibilities.

Alice had become the leader of a study group and found that she enjoyed teaching the other members of the group. Even though she had almost completed her undergraduate degree in nursing, she changed her major to Elementary Education.

After taking her first education course, Alice knew she had made the right decision. Alice stated:

My first education course at LSU required going in an elementary school and observing classrooms. I was hooked. I loved the whole atmosphere. Unlike the hospital, the school was bright and full of life. I could not wait to become a teacher. I was so excited about everything at this point. I just could not wait

to get in there and really make a difference.

After four years of teaching third grade, Alice still seemed just as excited about her chosen profession.

Alice passed Praxis on her first attempt. She graduated with a 3.123 college GPA.

After successfully completing LaTAAP, Alice decided to become a LaTAAP mentor. Alice stated: “LaTAAP is a wonderful program to assist rookie teachers. I strongly believe that without LaTAAP I would not be the teacher I am today”.

Alice now serves as a LaTAAP mentor.

Margaret

Margaret was the first person in her entire family to ever attend college. Margaret got married right out of high school and began a family. She had three children by the time she was twenty-four. She loved being a mom and expressed the belief that this was her calling in life.

Margaret and her husband decided to home school their children. After home schooling her children for six years she decided to attend LSUA to obtain a degree in Elementary Education. She acknowledged:

My professors at LSUA taught me a great amount. Just watching the teachers and their teaching styles was very instrumental in helping me develop my own teaching style. I have always enjoyed children and working with children. I also liked the schedule I would have with my own family.

Margaret passed Praxis on her first attempt. She had two mentors for LaTAAP due to her first mentor having to take a medical sabbatical. She received excellent leadership from both mentors. She completed all requirements for LaTAAP stating that

“I don’t know if I could have done it without the guidance of my two mentors.” Margaret plans to become a certified LaTAAP mentor so that she can assist novice teachers.

Ashley

Ashley stated that she was born to be a teacher. She remembers playing school and pretending she was a teacher. She made her mother, father, and siblings act as her students. She loved school and knew from an early age that she wanted to teach.

As a teenager, her love for young children began to grow. She served as a volunteer to teach elementary children the importance of moral character. She stated, “When I’m in front of a class teaching I feel as if I’m home. I absolutely love it!” Ashley and her volunteer sponsor stated that she is a natural in front of the classroom.

Ashley completed high school and could not wait to start college. She immediately enrolled in summer school. She joined many organizations and really got involved in campus life. It did not take Ashley long to realize that she was going to need a job to support her active college life. She decided to become a substitute teacher. She could only substitute teach two days a week because she attended college three days a week. She continued to work as a substitute teacher for three years until her professional college courses began to interfere.

Ashley passed Praxis with no problem. Ashley had a pleasant experience with LaTAAP. She passed all requirements for LaTAAP. She learned and thrived throughout the whole program. Ashley acknowledged:

LaTAAP made all the difference in the world to me. Honestly, I’m not sure I could have made it my first year without LaTAAP and the assistance of my mentor. LaTAAP is truly making a positive difference in the lives of new teachers and students.

Ashley is in the process of training to become a LaTAAP mentor. She has taught third grade for four years at a rural school in central Louisiana.

Primary Findings

An analysis of the questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups revealed several commonalities of the participants' Praxis and LaTAAP experiences which have had an effect on their personal lives and professional practice. The issues in common included professional growth, mentoring, and testing. These three commonalities were determined from questions addressed on the questionnaire, interviews, and focus groups. Through all components of data gathering, every participant stressed the importance and impact of these three themes. Other issues arose during the process, but none were emphasized as consistently as these. Each commonality will be discussed through comparison and contrast of the participants' views with regard to the aforementioned issues.

The following table illustrates an overview of the comments of each of the participants with regard to their professional growth, mentoring, and testing.

Table 4

Participant	Professional Growth	Mentoring	Testing
Alice	Alice credited LaTAAP for preparing her to teach. She stated that LaTAAP made her sure and secure about herself as a teacher.	Alice now serves as a mentor. Alice described her mentor as a guide and director. She stated that her mentor gave her the confidence that she needed to become a successful teacher.	Alice passed Praxis on her first attempt. She stated that some of the strongest teachers she has observed had to take Praxis I more than once asserting that Praxis is not an effective measure for teacher effectiveness.

Table 4, continued

<p>Ashley</p>	<p>Ashley stated that LaTAAP contributed to her professional growth in classroom teaching practices and her ability to relate and work with her colleagues. Ashley explained the LaTAAP assisted her in planning and organizing. She asserted that LaTAAP is the ultimate opportunity for professional growth.</p>	<p>Ashley credited her mentor for her LaTAAP success. She stated that she learned how a model lesson should be taught and planned from observing her mentor. She stated that she learned how to work with her peers through working with her mentor. Ashley is in the process of becoming a mentor.</p>	<p>Ashley passed Praxis with no problem but admitted to guessing when she did not know the answer.</p>
<p>Beth</p>	<p>Beth asserted that she learned how to organize, plan, and manage time through LaTAAP. She stated that before she met her mentor she was having problems in each of these three areas.</p>	<p>Beth stated that it would have been difficult to survive the first year of teaching without a mentor. Beth stated that having a mentor is crucial for retaining beginning teachers. She credited her mentor for offering ways to organize, plan, and manage time.</p>	<p>Beth had to take Praxis I twice. She asserted that Praxis is unable to determine the effectiveness of a teacher.</p>
<p>Jeri</p>	<p>Jeri realized that LaTAAP played an important role in her ability to assess her own teaching, thus promoting professional growth. She described LaTAAP as the best professional</p>	<p>Jeri's mentor helped plan weekly units. Her mentor acted as a guide during her first years of teaching. Jeri stated that not only did she benefit from a mentor but her students did, as well. She asserted</p>	<p>Jeri failed Praxis I twice. On her third attempt at Praxis I, she passed. Jeri stated that she has never scored well on standardized tests. She explained that she experiences test phobia and anxiety.</p>

Table 4, continued

	learning experience she had ever had.	that her mentor positively influenced her abilities as a teacher.	Jeri asserted that Praxis cannot determine if one will be an effective teacher.
Joe David	Joe David expressed how he professionally grew through LaTAAP. Through LaTAAP, he learned management skills, organizing skills, and how to plan a lesson.	Joe David expressed how his mentor showed him ways to get organized and stay organized. He attributes his success in teaching to his mentor. He plans to become a mentor in the near future.	Joe David passed Praxis I on his second try. He stated that a written exam is not capable of judging teacher effectiveness.
Kate	Kate asserted that LaTAAP is making a positive impact on new teachers and their students. She stated that the techniques and procedures that she learned from LaTAAP and her mentor are positively impacting her students.	Kate stated that her mentor was open and caring. She admitted to still consulting her mentor when needed. Kate plans to become a mentor.	Kate passed Praxis on her first try. Kate expressed feelings of apprehension going into the exam.
Lacie	Lacie stated that through LaTAAP she learned how to use discipline in a classroom. At the start of her first year, she struggled with behavior problems. LaTAAP and her mentor offered discipline techniques and procedures that helped her overcome this	Lacie asserted that mentoring helped her gain new insights into her professional practice. She stated that her mentoring experiences impacted her understanding of her role as a teacher. She stated that her mentor assisted her with time management,	Lacie passed Praxis on her first attempt. She stated that she has always fared well on standardized tests. Lacie expressed the significance of standardized testing for some professions for determining teacher effectiveness.

Table 4, continued

	deficient.	discipline, and planning. Lacie plans to become a mentor in the future.	
Margaret	<p>Margaret credited LaTAAP for getting her through the first years of teaching. She stated that without LaTAAP it would have been difficult to manage.</p>	<p>Margaret had two mentors. She described the experience of having two mentors as an advantage stating that she was able to experience more styles of teaching than the mentee that only had one mentor. She is training to become a mentor.</p>	<p>Margaret passed Praxis on her first try. She expressed concerns of guessing on Praxis. She stated that Praxis is not the best measure for teacher knowledge.</p>
Melanie	<p>Melanie stated that her LaTAAP experience has prepared her more so than any other professional experience thus far. She asserted that the being observed by an experienced teacher improved her teaching skills.</p>	<p>Melanie credits her LaTAAP success to her mentor. She stated that without her mentor she may not have lasted the entire first year. Melanie said that her mentor assisted her with daily and weekly lesson plans and with the much needed classroom discipline.</p>	<p>Melanie passed Praxis on her first attempt. She stated that she typically scored well on standardized tests. Although Melanie had no problem passing Praxis, she expressed concerns about the format of the exam which allows guessing making it difficult to determine the actual knowledge of the teacher.</p>
Nancy	<p>Nancy stated that LaTAAP attributed to her professional growth by opening doors for sharing with her peers.</p>	<p>Nancy first served as a mentee and now serves as a mentor. Nancy expressed how she cannot imagine going through her first year without a mentor. She referred</p>	<p>Nancy passed Praxis her first time but asserts Praxis</p>

Table 4, continued

		to her mentor as her rock. Nancy went to her mentor for questions, answers, and guidance.	cannot determine teacher effectiveness.
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Professional Growth

Professional growth is essential for every individual. Professional growth includes formal and informal means of acquiring new skills but also with development insights into ones own classroom practice, and exploring new or advanced understandings of content and resources. Professional growth is acknowledged as a continuous process with varying degrees of intensity throughout ones career.

Professional growth with regard to their teaching practice was an important issue for all ten of the participants. These participants, to varying degrees, felt that their teaching practice had been positively influenced by LaTAAP, thus improving their instructional strategies and positively impacting their students’ learning.

Of all the participants, Ashley had the strongest feelings about professional growth in her teaching practice as a result of LaTAAP. Ashley affirmed, “LaTAAP helped me to be better in my planning and organizing”.

Not only did Ashley’s LaTAAP experience provide growth in her classroom teaching practices, but it also provided growth in her ability to relate and work with her colleagues. She stated:

After completing LaTAAP, I’m now able to work with my peer teachers that have experience. We’re able to watch each other and grow with each other. In the past, you did your own thing and nobody else bothered you. You were not involved in other classrooms and what was going on.

Ashley asserted that LaTAAP allowed her the opportunity to realize that there was much to be learned from and shared with other colleagues. Where in the past, she had stayed inside her “own little world”, she now had confidence to seek her peer teachers’ advice and was more willing to share her own teaching experiences with others. She acknowledged, “We work together and plan together and give each other ideas and feel comfortable doing that, where in the past we didn’t do that kind of thing. Nobody was comfortable observing another teacher”. Ashley believed that LaTAAP attributed to the aforementioned change in her school, not only in herself as a mentor, but in her non-mentoring colleagues as well. She summed it up in this way: “I think LaTAAP is the ultimate opportunity for professional growth”.

Melanie also asserted that LaTAAP positively influenced her own abilities as a teacher. She realized that having an experienced teacher observe her teaching would improve her skills. She stated that “when you’re getting ideas and suggestions, you feel obligated to try and implement them in your teaching so that it may help you improve”. Melanie asserted that her LaTAAP experience thus far has prepared her more so than any other professional experience, including student teaching.

Nancy also stated that LaTAAP positively attributed to her professional growth as a teacher. She credited LaTAAP for helping her be open to the “tried and true” ideas that mentors had to offer. At the same time, she realized the importance of sharing her own new ideas.

Jeri realized that LaTAAP had played an important role in her ability to assess her own teaching, thus promoting professional growth. She described her LaTAAP experience in this way:

Going through LaTAAP was the best professional learning experience I've ever had. The first year of assistance is amazing. New teachers need the assistance for a year before going into the assessment year. LaTAAP got me where I needed to be professionally.

Joe David expressed that he had grown tremendously through LaTAAP. He acknowledged:

Personally I could not have made it without LaTAAP. I thought I was prepared to teach coming out of college but I soon found out that there was so much more for me to learn. LaTAAP was an awesome and necessary experience.

Lacie relayed over and over again how she learned so much from LaTAAP stating:

LaTAAP gave me the training that I needed. I probably would have resigned after my first year teaching had it not been for the positive influence of LaTAAP. LaTAAP positively influenced my abilities as a teacher.

Kate stated that LaTAAP is making a positive impact on new teachers and on students. Although she has completed LaTAAP, she still consults her mentor when needed. Kate plans to become a LaTAAP mentor so that she can give to novice teachers as her mentor so graciously gave to her.

Beth raved over her LaTAAP experience. She expressed how LaTAAP is crucial for the survival of beginning teachers. Beth contributes her success in teaching largely to LaTAAP stating that "LaTAAP made me the teacher I am today". She stated that she would not have completed her first year without the assistance she received from LaTAAP.

Alice had such a pleasant experience with LaTAAP that she now serves as a LaTAAP mentor. She described her LaTAAP experience this way,

LaTAAP was a beacon in the night. I was insecure and very unsure of myself as a teacher. After completing LaTAAP, I felt sure and secure. I felt ready to teach.

Margaret also had a wonderful experience with LaTAAP. Although she had two mentors, she felt she had excellent leadership from both mentors. Margaret acknowledged “LaTAAP was my saving grace”. Margaret is training to become a LaTAAP mentor.

These comments clearly revealed that LaTAAP did have a positive effect on the professional teaching practices of teachers. All ten of the participants expressed some aspect of how they had experienced professional growth through LaTAAP. Each participant agreed that their instructional strategies, enhanced through LaTAAP, had positively impacted their students’ learning.

Mentoring

Mentoring is a process in which the mentor serves as a role model, trusted counselor, and teacher who provides opportunities for development, growth, and support to new teachers. Mentoring is a form of teaching that includes walking alongside the person you are teaching and inviting him or her to learn from your example.

The issue of mentoring generated strong comments from all the participants. The participants’ all agreed that the mentoring aspect contributed strongly to a positive teaching experience. All participants were paired with a mentor from the same area of teaching.

Ashley learned how a model lesson should be taught and planned from observing her mentor. She stated:

When my mentor came in to observe me I had to model an ideal lesson. By doing that, my teaching got better. I made sure that every time I taught, everything was there for her to see.

Through mentoring, Ashley learned how to work with her peer teachers. She shared that prior to her mentoring experience she had trouble sharing with her peers.

Nancy stated that mentors should be teachers who were experienced and experts in their subject area. Her mentor was ideal. She recollected her feelings in this way:

Working with an experienced teacher (mentor), I've learned many tricks of the trade. Their own "tried and true" teaching methods gave me many ideas to at least try. They are helping you with the old standard ideas and I am helping them with the new. That works for everyone.

Nancy now serves as a student teacher mentor and as a LaTAAP mentor.

Jeri stated that not only did she benefit from having a mentor but her students ultimately benefited from this experience. She asserted that her mentor positively influenced her own abilities as a teacher.

Having a mentor helped me think through what I'm doing correctly and what I'm doing wrong. If my mentor comes in and sees me doing something incorrectly, she is able to correct the problem on the spot so that it may not negatively affect my students.

Joe David had such a pleasant experience with his mentor that he attributes his success in teaching, thus far, to his mentor. He acknowledged:

I can honestly say that I would not have survived my first year without my mentor. I learned skills from my mentor by just simply observing her in the classroom.

Lacie also had a wonderful experience with mentoring stating:

I don't think I could have made it my first year without my mentor. My management and discipline left much to be desired. I really benefited from my mentor in these two areas. Being able to observe a seasoned teacher was also very helpful.

Although Kate has successfully completed LaTAAP, she still consults her mentor when needed. She had such a positive learning experience with her mentor that she plans

on becoming a LaTAAP mentor so that she can give to new teachers as her mentor so graciously gave to her.

Beth expressed that a mentor is crucial for retaining beginning teachers. She stated that she would not have continued teaching after her first year if she would not have had the assistance of her mentor. Beth is planning on becoming a LaTAAP mentor in the near future.

Alice also had a wonderful mentor to guide and direct her. She described her mentoring experience this way,

I needed a mentor to guide and direct me through those first two scary years. I didn't have much faith in myself as a teacher. My mentor took me under her wing and showed me how to have confidence and to be secure in the classroom.

Margaret had a pleasant experience with her mentor. Although she had two mentors, she reported an excellent leadership from both mentors. She stated that she was "lucky" to have had the opportunity to work with two mentors. She was able to see more styles of teaching than the mentee that only has one mentor. Margaret is training to become a LaTAAP mentor.

The participants' all agreed that the mentoring aspect contributed strongly to a positive teaching experience. Data analysis revealed that the participant's views of the practice of mentoring are positive for the professional teaching practices of teachers and student's learning. The process of mentoring guides a less experienced individual in the development and re-examination of their own ideas, learning and personal and professional development. Participants indicated that the mentor, mentee, and the students all benefit from the mentoring process.

Testing

Although the participants were positive about their LaTAAP experience, they were negative about Praxis. All ten participants agreed that Praxis is not an effective assessment of a teacher's ability to teach. None of the participants in this study believed that Praxis in any way contributed to their professional development. Several of the participants confessed to guessing the answer, experiencing test anxiety, and having to take the examination again after failing it their first or second attempt.

Nancy had high passing scores on Praxis. She passed all three sections of Praxis the first time she took the exam. Although Nancy did extremely well on Praxis, she does not believe that Praxis can determine if a teacher will be a successful teacher. She stated that Praxis should not be a determinate for teacher success because it does not assess a teacher's ability to teach.

Although Ashley passed Praxis with no problem she does not perceive Praxis to be a true indicator of teacher effectiveness. Ashley asserted that an individual could pass Praxis by guessing their way through the test.

Melanie passed Praxis with high scores on her first try. She said that she has always done well on standardized tests. Although her Praxis scores were extremely well she agreed that Praxis did not and could not determine a teacher's ability to be effective in the classroom.

Lacie has always done well on standardized tests. She passed Praxis on her first attempt. She thought standardized tests were significant in some areas but did not believe it could determine the effectiveness of a teacher.

Passing Praxis was not a problem for Kate. She passed the exam on her first attempt. Kate admitted that she did guess at many questions on Praxis. She passed Praxis on her first attempt but admits she was surprised due to her ACT score and GPA.

Alice perceived Praxis as a good tool to test teacher knowledge but agreed that it could not determine if a teacher would be a success. She passed Praxis on her first attempt. Alice stated that Praxis testing locations should be convenient for the participants to reduce time and financial hardships related to expenses for such items as meals and travel expenses. Alice does not believe that Praxis can determine teacher effectiveness.

Margaret's had mixed perceptions about Praxis. She asserted that teachers should know the material on Praxis in order to be effective; however she realized that Praxis is constructed to allow guessing. Therefore, she asserted that Praxis is not the best measure for teacher knowledge.

Beth had to take Praxis I twice after failing on her first attempt. She stated that Praxis is a "money making gimmick". She asserted that ETS should take into account that the individuals taking Praxis are college students and that these individuals may have a difficult time paying for the exam. Therefore, the cost of the exam should be lowered. Beth does not understand how a standardized test can or will determine teacher effectiveness.

Joe David had to take Praxis I twice. He failed it the first time he took it but passed with a respectable score on his second try. He stated that standardized tests scores can be affected by the way you feel and by what is going on in your life at the time you

take the exam. Therefore, he does not think Praxis can or should determine teacher effectiveness.

After failing Praxis I on her first two attempts, Jeri attributed her failing scores to test anxiety. She stated that she has never done well on standardized tests. She stated that she has a phobia when it comes to these types of exams. Jeri expressed that students could possibly benefit from Praxis workshops that would not only help prepare students for the exam but to help ease test anxiety.

The three participants who had problems passing Praxis I eventually passed. Beth and Joe David passed on their second attempt. Beth stated that she had always been afraid of standardized tests. Joe David admitted to experiencing some depression due to personal issues, which he chose not to disclose, the day of the exam that may have contributed to his failure. Neither of them used any type of remediation. After failing Praxis I twice, Jeri did seek remediation. Jeri stated that she suffered from test anxiety and test phobia. She enrolled in a seminar offered by the university to help reduce test anxiety. Jeri stated that through this seminar, she was able to better handle the stress of test taking by using simple techniques she learned. Techniques that Jeri incorporated were breathing, mind control, and stretching. Jeri was successful on her third attempt at Praxis I. She credits the seminar for reducing her stress and anxiety level which she believes improved her scores to a passing level. In the interviews and focus groups, each participant discussed their personal teaching experience and their experience with LaTAAP. Participants stated that just because one may have failed Praxis I, their effectiveness as a teacher could not be judged by that factor alone. Alice expressed how some of the strongest teachers she has observed had to take Praxis more than once.

Participants who failed Praxis I stated that they were able to perform in the classroom just as well as their counterparts who passed Praxis I on their first attempt. None of the participants saw any evidence that initial failure or success on Praxis I had an impact on success with LaTAAP.

Participant perceptions’ revealed that Praxis is not an effective assessment of a teacher’s ability to teach. The issue of testing made some teachers afraid, angry, and anxious. All ten participants expressed negative views about the examination and none identified ways that Praxis contributed to their professional growth. The only factor that could be identified from participant reactions as an influence on their Praxis performance was personal issues related to their previous success on other standardized assessments.

One additional way of examining the information gathered from the participants is to consider issues within each of the three primary factors and their resolutions. The following table illustrates specific examples of issues and resolutions that occurred with each of the three commonalities.

Table 5

Commonalities	Issues	Resolutions
Professional Growth	1. Ashley had trouble working and collaborating with experienced peers.	1. LaTAAP allowed Ashley the opportunity to realize that there was much to be learned from and shared with other colleagues.

Table 5, continued

	<p>2. Several of the participants had difficulty with planning and organizing.</p>	<p>During LaTAAP, mentees and mentors are required to collaborate therefore eliminating the barrier of Ashley's reluctance to approach experienced colleagues.</p> <p>2. LaTAAP provided tried and true ideas and suggestions that assisted new teachers in planning and organizing. For example, Kate's mentor made a weekly schedule that included time to plan lessons and demonstrated through observations how important a structured routine was to her professional development.</p>
<p>Mentoring</p>	<p>1. Lacie experienced some difficulty with management and discipline.</p> <p>2. Alice was afraid and lacked confidence in her abilities as a teacher.</p>	<p>1. The mentor observed Lacie and offered ideas and suggestions to assist her in these two areas. One specific suggestion offered to Lacie by her mentor and one that Lacie observed was consistency in classroom management. Lacie's mentor stressed that the single most important factor in her successful classroom management was consistency in dealing with all classroom issues, especially discipline.</p> <p>2. The mentor was there to guide and direct Alice through her first year of uncertainty. Through direct mentoring, Alice's mentor provided suggestions and constructive criticism toward the areas Alice</p>

Table 5, continued

		needed to improve. The mentor also provided praise and positive reinforcement to reassure Alice of the things she did well.
Testing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Jeri expressed that she experiences test anxiety which may be the reason she failed Praxis. 2. Joe David was having some personal issues the day of his exam which may have contributed to his failure on Praxis. 	<p>Although participant perceptions' revealed that Praxis is not an effective assessment of a teacher's ability to teach, the state of Louisiana requires teachers to take the exam.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Many people experience test anxiety however, professionals must find techniques to overcome such phobias so that their knowledge may be tested. 2. Personal problems may occur the day of the exam which could affect an individual's score. One should consider rescheduling Praxis until the situation is resolved.

In addition to the search for factors impacting performance, the participants were asked in the final focus group to offer suggestions regarding potential further research in this area. Only two suggestions were provided. First, a participant suggested an expansion of the study to include larger numbers of teachers and representatives from institutions throughout Louisiana. Second, it was recommended that a more comprehensive study to measure longitudinal growth over time throughout the LaTAAP process would be beneficial.

The Research Question

The central research question was:

What factors or issues are identified by novice teachers as influences on their performance in standardized assessments and classroom teaching effectiveness?

Data analysis revealed that LaTAAP and the practice of mentoring do have a positive effect on the professional teaching practices of teachers. All participants stated that the mentoring portion of LaTAAP was the most beneficial for their professional growth. Participants reported that LaTAAP allows novice teachers to grow, learn, ask questions, and get answers from experienced teachers. They also indicated that LaTAAP provided them with guidance in lesson planning, organizing, discipline, and classroom management then allows them to put theory into practice. Testing generated a negative response from the participants. Praxis was found by all to be a frustrating and intense experience regardless of their level of performance. All participants agreed that Praxis does not serve as a valid determinate for teacher effectiveness and indicated that success was more related to their personal life experiences of testing than anything else. The importance that the issues of professional growth, mentoring, and testing play in the initial attitudinal development of the teachers toward their teaching proved revealing across all dimensions of their teaching experiences.

Several personal factors that were identified by novice teachers that influence performance on standardized assessment included test anxiety, test phobias, problems in their personal lives, past perceptions of how they will perform on a standardized test, nerves, and guessing at answers. These factors were the only factors given credit by the participants in this study for influence performance on Praxis and LaTAAP.

Interactions between mentoring and professional growth were recognized as having a direct influence on teacher performance. For example, participation in the mentoring process was recognized as a stimulus for greater communications among fellow teachers. Therefore, discussions would ensue that often resulted in advice or information related to discipline, time management, planning, organizing, classroom management, confidence, knowledge of subject matter, and peer collaboration. These discussions not only provided personal ideas to enhance teacher performance, but even lead to the pursuit of readings or staff development activities in the various aspects of teaching. From a reverse perspective, the novice teachers felt encouraged to discuss their ideas gained from readings or professional development with their mentors and colleagues. Consequently, mentors and colleagues developed a different perspective of the novices as sources of information as well as sources of questions. This resulted in more confident and knowledgeable novice teachers.

Summary of Findings

The data analysis revealed three commonalities of the participants' mentoring experiences which have had an effect on their professional practice. These included issues concerning professional growth, mentoring, and testing.

Professional growth with regard to their practice was an important issue for all of the participants. As these participants were mentored, self-reflection of their own teaching practices occurred, thus encouraging growth in their teaching skills and strategies. Increased camaraderie among colleagues was also considered to be a direct result of LaTAAP. These participants stated that with the onset of LaTAAP, both mentor

teachers and non-mentor teachers began to feel more at ease with sharing of their ideas and skills with each other.

Mentoring through LaTAAP was a positive experience for all participants. All participants asserted that the mentoring portion of LaTAAP was the most beneficial. All participants expressed how they needed a mentor to get them past their rookie phase. The mentors were there to assist with management, planning, organization, discipline and many other areas where novice teachers tend to struggle.

The issue of testing generated a negative response from the participants. All of the participants used a variation of the word “stressful” to describe their feelings concerning Praxis. Praxis was found by all to be frustrating and intense. Personal issues such as test anxiety, test phobia, and guessing were found to be important factors in the development of the participants’ attitudes toward Praxis, and therefore, also impacted their performance.

In the following chapter, focus will be made on implications emerging from this study in terms of further research. An analysis of findings and a discussion of these findings in terms of related research will also be presented.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Introduction

This chapter offers an analysis of findings and a discussion of these findings in terms of related research. This chapter also presents implications on teacher effectiveness, implications for future research, and concluding observations.

This study explored the experiences of teachers that completed LaTAAP and the effects these experiences had on their professional practice and personal lives. The personal reflections of ten teachers were elicited through questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups, analysis of which revealed several commonalities. The issues in common included professional growth, mentoring, and testing. Each commonality was discussed through comparison and contrast of the participants' views with regard to the aforementioned issues.

The research question for this study was developed based on a foundation study, gaps in the research, and personal experiences as a teacher and an external evaluator. The central research question was: *What factors or issues are identified by novice teachers as influences on their performance in standardized assessments and classroom teaching effectiveness?* This question guided the inquiry and analysis of the data.

Analysis of Findings

Participants invited to take part in this study included fourteen experienced public school teachers who had participated in the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program. Of the fourteen teachers invited, ten responded to the initial letter agreeing to participate in this study. These teachers had met the requirements set forth by

the Louisiana State Department of Education with regard to the aforementioned program and were chosen from former graduates of Louisiana State University at Alexandria.

Questionnaires, individual interviews and focus group interviews were utilized to elicit the participants' personal reflections with regard to their teaching experiences. These personal reflections were analyzed through coding of the data transcripts in search of participant commonalities. As these commonalities were identified, certain issues emerged as most significant in the teachers' personal teaching experiences. The issues in common included professional growth, mentoring, and testing. Using the identified issues, comparisons and contrasts were then made to determine the degree to which the participants' mentoring practice had affected their personal lives and professional practice.

Professional growth with regard to their teaching practice was an important issue for all of the participants. These participants, to varying degrees, expressed how their teaching practice had been positively influenced by LaTAAP. As the mentoring portion of LaTAAP took place, self reflection encouraged growth in their teaching skills and strategies. Increased camaraderie among colleagues was also considered to be a direct result of LaTAAP. These participants stated that with the onset of LaTAAP, both mentors and those being mentored began to feel more at ease with sharing of their ideas and skills with each other.

Mentoring through LaTAAP was a positive experience for all participants. All participants agreed that the mentoring portion of LaTAAP was the most beneficial. The participants asserted that their mentor was needed to help get them through their first

year. The mentors assisted novice teachers with management, planning, organization, discipline and many other areas where novice teachers tend to struggle.

Testing generated a negative response from the participants. Praxis was deemed a stressor and was found by all to be frustrating and intense. Some participants reported experiencing test anxiety, test phobia, and other similar issues in Praxis as in prior standardized testing experiences. Although most participants agreed teachers should be knowledgeable about Praxis material, none of the participants believed that Praxis impacted their teacher effectiveness.

Analysis of the results revealed that LaTAAP does have a positive affect on the professional teaching practices of novice teachers. The degree to which this affect occurred varied from teacher to teacher. The issues of professional growth, mentoring, and testing were found to play an important role in the attitudinal development of the novice teachers toward their experience with the mentoring process.

Findings in Context

This study of the experience of novice teachers and their performance in standardized assessments and classroom teaching effectiveness was undertaken in view of the deficit in the literature. As Allen et al. (2002) concluded in their study of mentors' perspectives of their mentoring experiences, additional research focusing on the mentor seemed critical to increasing knowledge of mentoring relationships. A research study by Jones (2001) also acknowledged the need for mentors to be given "their own voice" (p.75) in reporting their individual perspective of their mentoring practice.

Bozionelos (2003) concluded that mentoring had positive consequences for the professional practice of mentors. Bozionelos' (2003) study revealed that mentors "gain

satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, and additional meaning in their work” as a result of their mentoring. In addition, a study by Zeek, Foote, and Walker (2001) discovered that as mentors are allowed to share about their experiences, their sense of isolation is reduced and they are encouraged to see themselves as professional practitioners of learning.

In this current study, professional growth was also determined to be an important issue. However, another aspect of professional growth was revealed. Not only did mentoring affect the professional growth of the mentors, but it also affected the professional growth of their colleagues as well. Palmer’s (1993) discourse concerning the improvement of teaching through conversation between teachers within their communities asserted that faculty lack “the continuing conversation with colleagues that could help us grow more fully into the demands of the teacher’s craft” (p.8). With the onset of mentoring within the participants’ schools, Palmer’s observation was addressed. The participants stated that both mentor teachers and non-mentor teachers alike began to feel more at ease exchanging their ideas and skills with one another, thus encouraging professional growth for all.

Implications on Teacher Effectiveness

This study sought to discover and explore what factors or issues are identified by novice teachers as influences on their performance in standardized assessments and classroom teaching effectiveness. As a result, several implications for the field of teacher effectiveness have been discovered. These include personal implications for mentors and novice teachers and implications for novice teachers’ perceptions of the assessment

experiences. These implications have been revealed by the participants themselves as they told their mentoring stories in their own words.

Personal Implications for Novices and Mentors

As this study has revealed, the role of a new teacher can be rewarding yet challenging. This role is a complex one, sometimes confusing, sometimes complicated, and at all times challenging to the teachers who are participants in it. As shown by the related stories of the participants in this study, mentoring through LaTAAP allows experienced teachers to share their time and talents to help novice teachers become successful educators. Prospective teachers need to understand the expectations of their role and need to be given as much insight as possible before accepting it. Failure to understand teaching expectations can set the stage for a negative beginning to their teaching practice. Prospective teachers need to question administrators and other teachers to receive the best information they can in order to make an informed decision with regard to accepting or rejecting their prospective teaching role.

Professional growth in teaching practices was found to be a positive aspect of LaTAAP. All ten participants in this study recognized that self-reflection of their teaching practices had occurred during their mentoring tenure, thus strengthening their teaching skills and strategies. Teachers should be aware that self-reflection of their teaching practices as a result of their mentoring has been shown to encourage professional growth. According to the participants of this study, managing their classrooms, organization skills, and maintaining satisfying personal lives inside and outside the classroom were all issues that challenged them throughout their mentoring

tenure. School administrators, mentees' own personal families, and the families of their students have been shown to play a role in dealing with the aforementioned issues.

Novice Teachers' Perceptions of Assessments

Although Praxis was not found to play a large part in the foundation of teachers' attitudes concerning their practice, LaTAAP was a positive influencing factor. All the participants in this study found Praxis to be stressful and frustrating. On the other hand, all participants agreed that LaTAAP was beneficial and needed.

From the participants' comments and the data analysis, the following implications are suggested concerning Praxis.

1. Praxis workshops should be given to not only help prepare for the exam but to help ease test anxiety. Given the significance identified by participants regarding previous testing experiences, these workshops should consider opportunities for discussions and reflections among the participants.
2. Praxis testing locations should be convenient for the participants to reduce time and financial hardships related to expenses for such items as meals and travel expenses.
3. The cost of Praxis should be lowered. ETS should take into consideration that the test takers are college students and will have a difficult time paying for the exam.

Implications for Future Research

During the course of this research and data analysis, implications for future research emerged. The following recommendations, if explored, could consequently add

to the existing literature on the experiences of Praxis and LaTAAP as it is perceived by those who practice it – the novice teachers.

A research need exists for a comparison study of the different training programs for new teachers to enhance the development of efficient and appealing models for both outcomes and recruitment purposes. In this current study LaTAAP was found to play a large part in the foundation of the participants' attitudes concerning their teaching practice. All the participants found LaTAAP training to be a positive influence on their professional careers. From the participants' comments and the data analysis, a comparative study concerning the effectiveness of the different training programs for new teachers was suggested. Such a study would compare and contrast training programs with regard to their acceptance by trainees, thus encouraging the development of more efficient and appealing training programs. Such developments, in turn, could result in more positive attitudes towards training and more effective participation.

A study involving the use of other teaching professionals as mentors rather than classroom teachers may serve as a spring board for mentor program developers. Data analysis of this current study revealed that the participants were concerned with the amount of time spent away from their classrooms as a result of their mentoring practice. The participants asserted that one alternative to the use of classroom teacher mentors was the utilization of other teaching professionals, such as retired teachers or curriculum coordinators. These teaching professionals would not experience the time conflicts that classroom teachers experienced during their practice as mentors. A comparative study investigating mentoring effectiveness of classroom teachers with the mentoring

effectiveness of other teaching professionals would provide insight for mentor program developers as they develop criteria for the selection of mentors.

A study concerning the growth of students' learning as a result of LaTAAP may help to validate and encourage growth of new and existing programs. A dual study involving both qualitative and quantitative data would serve to ascertain the depth of students' learning as a result of their teachers' mentoring practice. Utilization of student surveys, interviews, and test scores would provide findings of student depth of learning. Positive findings would not only encourage development of new mentor programs, but would also validate existing mentor programs as well.

A study of school administrators' perceptions of LaTAAP could illuminate ways to address hurdles new teachers experience in the classroom. The historical and contemporary values of mentoring are not in dispute. However, the realities of current daily school life seriously challenge viable mentoring. There is scant research on school administrators' perceptions of mentoring. Addressing this gap and how to effectively infuse a positive climate of mentoring in school settings could provide a valuable contribution.

A larger quantitative study based on the primary findings of this current study may serve to validate participants' LaTAAP experiences. Development of an instrument with regard to professional growth, mentoring, and testing would serve as a method of data gathering which could then be utilized on a statewide basis. Analysis of such data could substantiate findings of this current study and be utilized by LaTAAP developers to change and modify the existing program.

A research need exists for a comparison study of qualifying examinations to enhance the development of teacher effectiveness. In this current study, Praxis was not believed to play a large part in the foundation of the participants' performance in the classroom. All the participants found Praxis to be stressful and frustrating. From the participants' comments and the data analysis, a comparative study concerning the effectiveness of the different licensure examinations for teachers was suggested. Such a study would compare and contrast tests with regard to their acceptance by teachers, thus encouraging the development of more efficient and effective tests. Such developments could result in more positive attitudes towards testing.

Personal Reflections

This research ascertained the experiences of new teachers in their own words as it pertained to their professional practice. All participants agreed that Praxis was not an effective tool to determine teacher effectiveness. As these stories were heard and reflected upon, the practice of LaTAAP began to be seen more clearly as the challenging, yet rewarding practice of experienced teachers struggling to help aspiring new teachers become the brightest and best. LaTAAP is not for the faint of heart, but rather for the courageous soul who feels a deep yearning to learn from experienced teachers.

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Letter of Consent For Adults

Dear Teacher:

I am a graduate student studying under the direction of Professor Charles S. Gifford, Ph.D. in the College of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of New Orleans. I am conducting a research study to address relationships by investigating the factors identified by novice teachers as influencing their performance on Praxis and LaTAAP.

I am requesting your participation, which will involve completing a questionnaire of approximately ten to fifteen minutes. Additionally, you may become one of the participants selected to be later interviewed individually and as part of a focus group. The individual interviews will take approximately twenty to thirty minutes. The focus groups will last approximately thirty minutes to an hour. The interviews will be held on the LSUA campus. All interviews will be audiotaped for accuracy and cross-referencing data. All materials and data collected in this study will be kept confidential.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty to your employment. Your identity will be kept confidential as the study will examine teacher profiles in aggregate. The results of the study may be published, but your name will not be used.

Although there may be no benefit to you personally, the possible benefit of your participation may contribute to existing professional development programs.

If you have any questions concerning this research study, I can be reached at 985-892-7581. Or you may contact Dr. Charles S. Gifford through his email address: charlesgifford@charter.net.

Sincerely,

Donna Odom

By signing below you are giving consent to participate in the above study.

Signature

Printed Name

Date

If you have questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, please contact Dr. Richard Speaker at the University of New Orleans (504) 280-6607.

**University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans**

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: Charles Gifford
Co-Investigator: Donna LaCaze

Date: June 20, 2007

PROTOCOL APPLICATION:

"An Investigation of Factors Identified by Novice Teachers
that Influence Performance on Standardized Assessments
and Teacher Performance."

IRB#:

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures described in this protocol application are compliant with the University of New Orleans and federal guidelines. This protocol was reviewed and approved under 45 CFR 46.110(1) categories 6 & 7.

Please remember that approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best of luck with your project!
Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'L. Scaramella', with a handwritten note in parentheses above it that says '(acting on behalf of Chair)'. The signature is written in black ink.

Laura Scaramella, Ph.D.
Chair, University Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

VITA

Donna Odom LaCaze was born and raised in Oakdale, Louisiana. Upon graduation from Oakdale High School, she attended Northeast Louisiana University (now known as University of Louisiana Monroe), where she graduated in 1993 with a B.A. degree in Elementary Education. Mrs. LaCaze received a Master's Degree in Administration and Supervision from McNeese State University in 1995. She continued her education at McNeese and earned an Education Specialist Degree in Administration and Supervision in 1997.

Mrs. LaCaze's experience as an educator began in a rural school in Oakdale, Louisiana where she served as an elementary school teacher for five years. After receiving her Education Specialist Degree she became an Instructor of Education at Louisiana State University Alexandria where she taught nine years. After recently moving to St. Tammany parish, Mrs. LaCaze is now serving as an adjunct instructor for Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, Louisiana. She continues to work as an external evaluator for the Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program.

Mrs. LaCaze is married to Todd LaCaze who serves as Vice President of Finance at Tulane Hospital. She is the proud mother of three sons, Jordan age 15, Christian age 11, and Joseph age 3.