Chapter 4 – Results

This section begins with the results of the Small Group Study. First, I discuss the results of the "brainstorming sessions," and the resulting interview protocols. Then I present the narratives that developed from the interviews with the six members of the Small Group Study. Finally, I present a brief discussion of the "common threads" which run through the narratives. A graphic representation of the data collection and analysis procedure that led to these results is found at the end of the Appendices. This chapter concludes with the narrative that resulted from the year-long series of interviews with "Derek," during his first year of full-time teaching.

Small Group Study

The "Small Group" study group consisted of six student teacher volunteers from the same cohort. There were four women and two men. The six members spanned the range of science subjects for their certifications. There was also wide diversity in level of prior teaching experience, with complete novices alongside people with a great deal of time logged in a classroom. Taken together, they provided a broad range of perspectives on teaching.

Two "brainstorming" sessions were held with the six members of the small group during their student teaching semester. During these sessions, the student teachers were asked to think about a particular topic relating to their student teaching. The participants wrote down their thoughts, in the form of words, phrases, and even pictures, on adhesive note cards, and placed those cards on a wall. Once all of the thoughts had been exhausted, the participants and the researcher co-operated in arranging the notes cards into themed groups. This was a highly iterative process, with the themed groups frequently shifting in subject and population. The small group reached compromises on several issues, and arrived at a number of final groupings. In any group discussion process, there is always the risk that one or two participants with dominant personalities

will exert a disproportionate influence on the results. Hopefully, the inclusive, free-form nature of the initial phase of investigation, and the later process of negotiation and compromise will dilute any dominating voices (especially that of the researcher) in the process. The researcher used these categories, or "affinities," generated to formulate question protocols for two sets of structured interviews. Essentially, the brainstorming sessions discovered what concerns were on the student teachers' minds, and allowed the researcher to create an interview protocol that afforded them a chance to elaborate on those concerns. The affinities resulting from the brainstorming sessions, and the associated interview protocols, are presented below.

The first brainstorming session took place after the student teachers had received their teaching assignments, but before they had actually begun their student teaching. Participants were asked to reflect on their expectations for teaching: what they might encounter, what they might need. Eight affinities emerged from this session:

Interacting with students – This matter was apparently foremost in the participants' minds, as this was the most populated affinity. The words "learning" and "understanding" were prominent in many responses. The participants look forward to working with students in a variety of ways:

- "relating and understanding"
- "the light in the darkness"
- "I know it's hard, but I know you can do it!"
- "active and interactive"
- "worksheets are boring"
- "encouraging tomorrow's minds"

Some participants were at a loss for words, and drew pictures of teachers interacting with students. One picture depicted light bulbs going off over students' heads,

while another pictured a student and a teacher speaking to each other. Yet another shows a teacher looming over much smaller students, labeled with the words "in control." Clearly, the student teachers have a wide spectrum of expectations regarding their future relationships with students.

The negative aspects of teaching – Whether from "horror stories" that they may have heard or from their own school experiences, the participants acknowledged that there were many potentially negative experiences ahead of them. The variety of responses gives an idea of the challenges they dread:

- "anger"
- "helpless"
- "stressful" (illustrated with frowning face)
- "never enough time"
- "overwhelming at first"
- "tiring!"

The positive aspects of teaching – The group dubbed these the "warm fuzzies" of teaching. The selection indicates that, despite the trepidation expressed above, the student teachers felt there were some things about teaching that they could anticipate with positive feelings:

- "great kids!"
- "pride"
- "exciting"
- "surprise"
- "fun"

Advice – In some cases, the student teachers mentioned pieces of advice that they had been given regarding their teaching:

- "Get Organized!!!"
- "Don't teach the test (TAAS)"
- "Stay neutral on the gossip"

Skills of the teacher – The student teachers were also concerned with the skills that they would need in the classroom:

- "preparation"
- "ADD, ADHD, IEP" [knowledge of special student needs]
- "organization"
- "expert knowledge"
- "forgiving"
- "lawyer"

The physical classroom – In many cases, the student teachers were thinking about actual physical aspects of the classroom itself rather than the more esoteric aspects of teaching:

- "desks"
- "overhead projector"
- "textbooks! (Used all the time)"
- "chalkboard"
- "fat pencils"

The future instructors were also concerned with their potential interactions with the actual classroom, as evinced by the inclusion of "chalk dust on your butt."

Questions – Many questions were going through the minds of the student teachers as they faced their first "real" classroom experiences:

- "Are they thinking?"
- "How do I entertain them?"
- "What are some fun activities?"

Caring – This particular aspect of a teacher rates its own affinity simply because of its ubiquity; every member of the small group mentioned "caring" as an essential characteristic of a teacher.

These eight affinities suggested questions for the first interview, so that the student teachers could be afforded an opportunity to elaborate independently on each theme. Two simple informational questions were included to make the following interview protocol for the first interview:

1. Please describe briefly your student teaching environment (school, students, supervisor/mentor, etc.)
2. Please describe briefly your science background.
3. So far, what are your impressions of the potential rewards, the "warm fuzzies," of teaching?
4. So far, what do you see as the most difficult aspects, the "cold pricklies" of teaching?
5. What physical aspects of the teaching environment do you think are most important to helping students learn, and why?
6. Please describe the best piece of advice that you've gotten about teaching. Why was it so good?

7. What personal skills do you think are most important to a teacher and why?

8. Many of your fellow students have made special mention of "caring" as a characteristic vital to a teacher. How do you define "caring," and why is it so important?

9. Describe the ideal relationship that you envision between a teacher and his or her students. How can we see this relationship manifested in the classroom?

10. What questions come to your mind almost every day you are teaching? How do you find the answers to these questions?

The second brainstorming session took place about halfway through the student teaching experience. This second session was similar in structure and process to the first, but the driving theme was different. Now that they had acquired some "real world" (if somewhat limited) experience in teaching, the student teachers were asked to reflect on their preserve education and how it prepared them for the experience. The resulting nine affinities reveal how the student teachers feel about the utility of their education classes:

"A waste of time" – This was by far the most thickly populated of the affinities that emerged from the second brainstorming session. All of the members of the small group chimed in some variation on this theme, in many instances describing their preservice education as "pathetic," a "joke," "stupid," "silly," and "worthless." The phrases used were harsh:

- "Give me a break"
- "Get a life"
- "What was I thinking?"
- "All that money … wasted!"
- "Why am I doing this?"
- "I want my money back"

- "Redundant and redundant"
- "Education – a lot of busy work"
- "Why the hell did I buy this book?"
- "How can I CLEP out of these courses?"

Feeling of being "unprepared" – many students wrote this word or words like it ("unwarned," "need more… training"), indicating that they felt their preservice education was incomplete.

Education classes "too easy" – Many of the members of the small group felt that their education classes were too easy, especially compared to the rigorous nature of science subject matter classes. This could be one reason for their overall low opinion of their preservice education. They used the words "boring," embarrassingly easy," and "too slow" to describe their preservice classes. Education classes had a difficult time measuring up:

- "Free grades"
- "No thinking involved – Do or do not"
- "Mostly trivial assignments"
- "Reading assignments at 9th grade level"

Irrelevance of education classes – Also contributing to the low opinion of the student teachers regarding their preservice classes was a perception that the classes were irrelevant to the "real world" of teaching. The courses were described by more than one member of the group as "unrealistic" and "idealistic." The student teachers elaborated on why they felt the way they did:

- "Wildly unrealistic expectations"
- "Too theoretical"

- "Lots of meaningless dialog"
- "Not enough real-life practical stuff"
- "Nothing applies until student teaching"

Low opinion of education professors – No doubt another contributing factor to the dim view that the student teachers took of their preservice education classes was the general low opinion that they held of their education professors. More than one student described education professors as "incompetent." The language used was far from gentle:

- "Stupid hippie professor"
- "Maddeningly chipper graduate supervisor"
- "Don't know my Ed. Psych teacher's name"
- "Prof with a big axe to grind"
- "Departmental disorganization"
- "You're full of it!"

Course subject matter – Although they were asked to focus on the education classes in their preservice education, many also reflected on their science subject matter classes. However, usually they were unfavorably comparing their education classes to their science classes:

- "Not enough science-based courses"
- "Science profs rule! (are real)"
- "Learned a lot in science classes"

One education class was unusual in that it inspired praise from the student teachers. They held positive feelings about their course in techniques for helping special needs students:

- "Good background in Special Ed"
- "[Special needs course] taught me how normal I really am"
- "All I learned is that I am NORMAL"

Stressful nature of teaching – During the student teaching experience, the members of the small group discovered what they probably already knew: teaching is a stressful occupation, especially when coupled with the stresses of being a student. Their responses indicate the reasons why:

- "Too much stuff to do"
- "Too much spread out"
- "Time consuming"
- "Important: Should NOT take 'real' classes in observation semester"
- "Too many masters to satisfy"
- "Didn't start early enough (wish they were over now)"
- "Other student teachers slowly going nuts"

One student summed it up succinctly: "Quit torturing me!"

Positive aspects of preservice education - Not all of the student teachers' proclamations were negative. Some of the student teachers were able to find good things to say about their education classes, although at times the positive statements seemed slightly strained:

- "Common sense"
- "Well-intentioned"
- "Interesting"
- "Some thought-provoking assignments"

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- "Liked [some professors]"
- "Microteaching – very helpful"
- "Good experiences"
- "Fun"

Interactions during education classes – The interactive nature of many education classes was clearly on the minds of many of the student teachers. Whether interacting with professors or with fellow students, the small group member saw many benefits to these interactions:

- "Like demos and ideas from other students"
- "Huge are range – cause of different opinions"
- "Older generation involved"
- "Like interaction with other student teachers"
- "Enjoyable discussions"
- "Good guest speakers"
- "Good 'gang' seminar"

However, the interactive nature of the classes held pitfalls:

- "Some people monopolize conversation"
- "Very bitter fellow student teachers"
- "There is always someone who loves to talk about personal problems"
- "Too many personal stories"

This second group of affinities inspired the 15 questions used in the second round of interviews:

1. How do you rate the difficulty level of your preservice classwork, and how do you justify that rating?

2. In what ways did your in-class interactions, either with your professors or with fellow students, affect the usefulness of your preservice education?

3. In what ways was your preservice classwork helpful in preparing you for student teaching?

4. Please describe some of the more negative aspects of your preservice classwork, things that made your training more difficult or less pleasant.

5. Many people in the focus group were of the opinion that their preservice classwork was irrelevant to the "real world" of teaching. What do you think would lead someone to that conclusion?

6. Many student teachers held very negative opinions about their preservice classwork, describing it with phrases like "waste of time," "boring," "I want my money back," etc. Please assess the worth of your preservice education, and explain why you feel that way.

7. Some student teachers felt that their preservice classwork left them unprepared for teaching. In what ways do you think your preservice education fell short in preparing you, and how could it have done a better job at preparing you?

8. What is your general impression of your host school (facilities, administration, atmosphere, etc.) now that you have been there awhile? Relate an experience that you have had involving the school itself.

9. What is your general impression of your students? In what ways has that impression changed over time? Relate an experience that you have had involving students.

10. What is your general impression of your host teacher? In what ways has she or he impacted your student teaching experience? Relate an experience that you have had involving your host teacher.

11. What are some of the positive memories you will take away from this student teaching experience?

12. What are some of the negative memories you will take away from this student teaching experience?

13. Time is obviously a major concern to student teachers, with some even claiming to lose sleep time to class preparation. In what ways do you deal with these intense time demands?

14. From what source did you get most of your help in "surviving" student teaching? In what ways was that source helpful?

15. How does your preservice education rank in helping prepare you for student teaching? Why does it rank where it does?

In addition to these questions, the second interview was used for member checking the researcher's perceptions of the answers given in the first interview. The third meeting was only devoted to member checking material from the second interview, with no new questions. Once the interviews were completed and analyzed, the researcher compiled the results into a narrative for each student teacher. The narratives represent the stories of these six student teachers and highlight their needs and wants as teachers. Further, they present candid critiques of the preservice education classes that were supposed to serve those needs and wants and prepare the student teachers to deal with the challenges of the classroom.