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Teacher voices in teacher education: A case study of perceptions and practices

Jeanne Mullican
Mamta Singh
Lamar University

Educator preparation programs (EPPs) play a critical role in preparing future educators for the complex realities of contemporary classrooms and in supporting long-term teacher retention. Alumni perspectives provide valuable insights into how well EPPs translate preparation experiences into effective professional practice. Guided by Occupational Socialization Theory, a convenience sample of alumni who completed the program participated in the study. Data were analyzed using collaborative qualitative analysis and thematic analysis procedures. Four themes emerged from the data: Relevant Practice, Influential Community, Unrealistic Expectations, and Meaningful Partnership. Findings indicated that field experiences, mentoring relationships, application-based coursework, and collaborative learning opportunities were viewed as the most influential aspects of preparation. Alumni also identified gaps related to classroom behavior management, inclusive practices, communication with stakeholders, and the realities of first-year teaching. Participants expressed a strong desire for ongoing professional development, networking opportunities, and continued connections with the university after graduation. The findings suggest that systematic alumni feedback can serve as an important mechanism for improving educator preparation, strengthening teacher socialization, and fostering teacher retention. Furthermore, the study highlights the value of extending university support beyond graduation to create sustained partnerships that contribute to professional growth and long-term success in the teaching profession.

Keywords: Educator Preparation Program (EPP), teacher education, alumni perceptions, teacher retention, occupational socialization, qualitative case study.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher preparation programs play a critical role in developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for effective teaching. As schools continue to experience teacher shortages, concerns about teacher retention, and increasing demands for inclusive and equitable instruction, educator preparation programs (EPPs) are under increasing pressure to demonstrate their effectiveness not only during certification but throughout graduates'

Dr. Mamta Singh is professor from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Lamar University. Jeanne Mullican is assistant professor from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Larma University. Mamta Singh can be reached at Msingh1@lamar.edu
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professional careers. Alumni perspectives provide a valuable source of evidence because graduates can reflect on how well their preparation translated into the realities of classroom practice. Research has consistently shown that field experiences, mentoring relationships, active learning opportunities, and professional collaboration contribute significantly to teacher readiness and retention. At the same time, many novice teachers report challenges related to classroom management, inclusive practices, workload expectations, communication with stakeholders, and work-life balance.

Recent national reports continue to emphasize the importance of high-quality teacher preparation and ongoing professional support as key factors influencing teacher persistence in the profession (Steiner et al., 2025, 2026; Learning Policy Institute, 2026). Findings from the 2025 and 2026 State of the American Teacher Surveys reveal that teacher well-being, workplace conditions, and professional supports remain closely connected to retention decisions and long-term career success. Although many studies examine teacher candidates during preparation, fewer studies explore the perspectives of graduates after they have entered the profession. Alumni are uniquely positioned to evaluate which aspects of their preparation were most valuable, identify areas needing improvement, and suggest ways universities can continue supporting teachers throughout their careers. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the perceptions of alumni who completed an Educator Preparation Program (EPP) at a state university in the southern United States. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Examine how alumni describe the successes and challenges of teaching and the extent to which the EPP prepared them for professional practice.
2. Identify alumni recommendations for future teachers and determine how alumni believe the EPP can continue to support them throughout their careers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) prepare hundreds of teachers each year and serve as a critical bridge between teacher candidates and the realities of professional practice. A fundamental goal of EPPs is to develop effective partnerships among universities, schools, and teacher candidates that support high-quality teacher preparation. Carpenter and Blance (2007) argued that teaching internships provide opportunities to establish a collaborative three-way partnership in which universities, schools, and teacher candidates share responsibility for program implementation, evaluation, and improvement. Although considerable attention has been devoted to the preparation of teacher candidates, less is known about how alumni perceive their preparation after entering the profession and how those experiences shape their long-term success and retention.

Preparing teachers presents unique challenges because teaching differs from many professions in that individuals spend years observing classrooms before formally entering the field (Lawson, 1983; Placek et al., 1995). These experiences influence candidates' preexisting beliefs about teaching and learning. As a result, teacher candidates often enter EPPs with well-developed notions of what teaching should look like based on their own experiences as students. Changing these deeply held beliefs can be difficult, particularly when candidates strongly identify with practices they observed during their own schooling (Ferry & McCaughtry, 2013; Placek et al., 1995).

Consequently, an important function of EPPs is to challenge existing assumptions and expose teacher candidates to evidence-based practices that may differ from their prior experiences. Research suggests that meaningful learning occurs when candidates experience some level of dissatisfaction with previously held beliefs, creating opportunities for conceptual change (Matanin & Collier, 2003; Placek et al., 1995; Posner et al., 1982). Through coursework, field experiences, reflective practice, and mentorship, teacher educators can encourage candidates to reconsider traditional assumptions and adopt more

effective instructional approaches (Lee et al., 2017). However, identifying universally effective teacher education practices remains difficult because successful approaches are often context dependent. Velle (2022) noted that while research-informed collaborative strategies offer guidance regarding quality teacher preparation, identifying a single "best practice" remains elusive due to the complex and contextual nature of teacher education.

Beyond influencing candidates through coursework, EPPs must also consider the powerful influence of field experiences. Research has consistently demonstrated that teacher candidates are often more strongly influenced by mentor teachers and school-based experiences than by university coursework alone (Hushman et al., 2013). Because field experiences serve as a crucial component of professional preparation, they should not simply reinforce candidates' existing beliefs developed during the acculturation phase. Rather, field experiences should provide opportunities for candidates to encounter innovative practices, critically reflect on teaching, and expand their professional perspectives (Richards & Templin, 2019). Furthermore, teachers frequently attribute their professional philosophies and instructional approaches to experiences gained during student teaching and other field placements, even years into their careers (Geisler, 2017).

The importance of effective teacher preparation is amplified by growing concerns regarding teacher retention and workforce stability. Educator Preparation Programs play a critical role not only in developing teaching competencies but also in fostering long-term commitment to the profession. Across the United States, teacher shortages and attrition continue to create challenges for school systems, increasing attention on how preparation experiences influence career persistence. Parker and Holmes (2025) argued that teacher retention has become a significant concern for the future of education, emphasizing that preparation programs must address the realities future teachers will encounter while providing the support systems necessary for professional success. According to these authors, preparing candidates with realistic expectations, resilience, and adaptable professional skills is essential for sustaining educators throughout their careers.

Recent national data further underscore these concerns. Findings from the RAND State of the American Teacher Survey revealed persistent challenges related to teacher well-being, workload, compensation, and job-related stress (Steiner et al., 2025). Although some improvements were reported, many teachers continued to identify workplace demands and work-life balance as factors influencing their intentions to remain in or leave the profession. These findings suggest that teacher retention is shaped not only by workplace conditions but also by how effectively preparation programs equip graduates to navigate professional challenges during the transition into teaching (Steiner et al., 2025).

These concerns remained evident in subsequent research. Steiner et al. (2026) found that teachers continued to report substantial levels of stress and concerns regarding working conditions. Many educators indicated that professional support, manageable workloads, and appropriate preparation for real-world teaching challenges influence their long-term career decisions. Together, these findings highlight the importance of EPPs helping candidates develop realistic understandings of teaching while simultaneously establishing support mechanisms that extend beyond graduation.

Professional support and opportunities for growth have also emerged as important factors affecting teacher retention. Hite et al. (2026) examined alumni from a STEM-focused professional development program and found that collaboration, leadership development, and professional networking positively influenced teachers' career satisfaction and professional identity. Teachers who remained in classroom teaching frequently cited opportunities to grow professionally and engage with supportive professional communities, whereas those who left the classroom often identified organizational limitations, restricted advancement opportunities, and insufficient support as

contributing factors. These findings suggest that meaningful professional relationships and ongoing learning opportunities can strengthen educator satisfaction and persistence.

Given these findings, researchers increasingly emphasize the importance of maintaining relationships between EPPs and their graduates. Traditionally, universities have viewed program completion as the endpoint of the teacher preparation process. However, emerging evidence suggests that continued engagement between universities and alumni may provide meaningful benefits for both parties. Alumni can provide valuable feedback regarding the effectiveness of preparation programs, while universities can offer professional development, networking opportunities, mentorship, and advanced educational pathways that support continued growth (Hite et al., 2026; Parker & Holmes, 2025). Such sustained partnerships may also strengthen professional identity and promote retention by fostering a sense of belonging within a broader educational community.

Taken together, the literature suggests that effective educator preparation extends beyond the acquisition of pedagogical knowledge and instructional skills. Teacher retention and professional success are influenced by candidates' prior experiences, the quality of coursework and field experiences, workplace realities, professional support systems, and opportunities for ongoing engagement within professional communities (Hite et al., 2026; Parker & Holmes, 2025; Steiner et al., 2025; Steiner et al., 2026). Understanding alumni perceptions therefore provides an important mechanism for evaluating program effectiveness and identifying areas for improvement. By examining graduates' reflections on their preparation and professional experiences, EPPs can strengthen curriculum, enhance occupational socialization, improve teacher retention, and develop meaningful partnerships that support educators throughout their careers.

Consistent with this literature, alumni in the present study identified field experiences, mentoring relationships, and application-based learning as some of the most influential aspects of their preparation. Many participants reported that mentor teachers, university supervisors, and authentic classroom experiences significantly shaped the educators they became. Although occupational socialization research suggests that new teachers often rely heavily on their acculturation and field experiences when entering the profession, alumni in this study also credited the EPP with expanding their pedagogical knowledge, instructional skills, and professional perspectives. These findings suggest that the program successfully challenged existing beliefs and encouraged a mindset of continuous growth and learning, demonstrating the powerful role EPPs can play in shaping teacher development beyond initial certification.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in Occupational Socialization Theory (OST), a framework widely used to understand how teachers develop professional beliefs, attitudes, and practices across their careers (Lawson, 1983, 1986). OST posits that teachers' professional identities are shaped through a continuous process of socialization that begins before entering teacher education and continues throughout their teaching careers. According to Lawson (1983), occupational socialization occurs across three interconnected phases: acculturation, professional socialization, and organizational socialization.

ACCULTURATION

The acculturation phase encompasses the experiences individuals have as K-12 students before entering teacher education. These experiences contribute to what Lortie (1975) termed the "apprenticeship of observation," whereby future teachers form beliefs about teaching based on years spent observing teachers in classrooms. These beliefs often become deeply ingrained and influence how teacher candidates interpret coursework and field experiences.

PROFESIONAL SOCIALIZATION

Professional socialization occurs during participation in an educator preparation program. During this phase, teacher candidates encounter pedagogical theories, subject-specific methods, field experiences, and mentorship opportunities that may either reinforce or challenge their prior beliefs. Effective teacher preparation programs intentionally create opportunities for conceptual change by encouraging candidates to critically examine previously held assumptions and adopt evidence-based instructional practices (Posner et al., 1982; McEntyre & Richards, 2021).

ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIALIZATION

Organizational socialization takes place after graduates enter the teaching profession. During this phase, teachers adapt to the realities of schools, including administrative expectations, workplace culture, professional learning communities, accountability systems, and relationships with students, families, and colleagues. Experiences during organizational socialization often determine whether teachers remain in the profession and continue professional growth. Socialization is an influential factor in how a teacher candidate performs in an EPP and it can affect if he/she embraces the expected academic and professional behaviors (McEntyre & Richards, 2021; Zhang, Shi, & Cheng, 2024)). Lawson (1986) described Occupational Socialization Theory (OST) as a culmination of all experiences that initially guide a person to begin the career path of a physical educator and that later shape their perceptions and actions. There are three stages of OST: acculturation (personal school experience as a student), professional (certification program), and organizational (career in teaching) (Lawson, 1983).

Recent research continues to validate OST as a useful lens for understanding teacher preparation and retention (McEntyre & Richards, 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Furthermore, contemporary studies examining teacher retention and professional learning suggest that mentoring, collaborative learning communities, and meaningful professional support significantly influence teachers' decisions to remain in the profession (Parker & Holmes, 2025; Hite et al., 2026). The present study uses OST to interpret alumni perceptions of their preparation experiences and their transition into professional practice. The framework provides a lens through which alumni reflections on field experiences, collaboration, professional challenges, and continued university engagement can be understood.

METHOD

In a case study, the researcher may develop "an in-depth analysis of a case, often a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 14). The case study method is a holistic research method that investigates in-depth "why" and "how" questions (Yin, 2009). This study investigated the perception of Teacher Preparation Alumni who went through the university's program and could provide feedback on their educational experience verses real-world practices. This study was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: How do alumni describe the ways in which the Educator Preparation Program prepared them for professional teaching practice?

RQ2: What successes and challenges do alumni experience in their teaching careers, and how do they perceive the role of the Educator Preparation Program in addressing those experiences?

RQ3: What recommendations do alumni have for future teachers and for continued engagement between the university and graduates?

DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative case study design. Case study research allows investigators to examine a contemporary phenomenon within its real-world context and is particularly useful for understanding how and why participants experience a program in a particular way (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2009). The bounded case consisted of alumni from a single Educator Preparation Program at a state university in the southern United States. The study sought to develop an in-depth understanding of graduates' experiences in the program and their transition into professional practice.

PARTICIPANTS

A convenience sample of alumni was utilized. Graduates who completed the Educator Preparation Program between 2015 and 2018 were invited to participate. A total of 375 alumni received an email invitation containing a survey link. Twenty-two alumni ultimately participated in interviews. Participants included 6 male and 16 female educators representing 16 school districts, one college, and one tutoring service in Texas. Participants worked across:

- Elementary schools
- Middle schools
- High schools
- Special education
- Physical education
- Fine arts
- Music
- Other educational settings

Schools represented rural, suburban, urban, Title I, and non-Title I settings, providing a diverse range of perspectives.

PROCEDURES

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained before data collection. Data collection occurred in two phases.

Phase I: Survey. Email invitations containing a Google Forms survey link were distributed to alumni. The survey included open-ended questions designed to gather perceptions regarding preparation experiences, professional successes and challenges, and recommendations for program improvement.

Phase II: Interviews. Survey participants were invited to volunteer for follow-up focus group interviews. Interested participants selected available meeting times using an online scheduling system. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were guided by eight predetermined questions (Appendix A). Faculty members used follow-up probing questions to encourage participants to elaborate on experiences and provide examples.

MEASUREMENT SURVEY INSTRUMENT

The survey included open-ended items aligned with the study's research questions. Questions focused on:

- Preparation experiences
- Professional successes
- Professional challenges

- Collaboration experiences
- Professional growth
- Influential program components
- Advice for novice teachers
- Desired alumni support

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The interview guide consisted of eight semi-structured questions corresponding to the survey topics. Interview responses served as the primary source of qualitative data. Examples included:

- How did the teacher preparation program help you become a successful teacher?
- What challenges did you encounter in your career?
- Were you prepared to work in diverse educational settings?
- What aspects of the program had the greatest impact on your development as a teacher?
- How might the university continue to support you professionally?

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis was conducted to answer each research question. Survey responses and interview transcripts were analyzed simultaneously using Collaborative Qualitative Analysis (CQA) (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Inductive thematic analysis was used to identify emergent themes, while deductive analysis through Occupational Socialization Theory provided a theoretical lens for interpreting the findings. The audio from the interviews were recorded. Recorded interviews were sent to a transcription service. The automatic transcription texts were then checked against the initial recordings to guarantee accuracy of captured statements. The responses from each survey question and interview responses were gathered and organized into a word document and then uploaded into Atlas.ti 9 for coding. The same faculty members who led the focus groups served as the two transcribers and coders. The faculty used Collaborative Qualitative Analysis (CQA) (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Within the framework of CQA, the six-stage process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyze the data. Participant responses were read numerous times with the goal of distinguishing statements that illustrate the focus and meaning of the participants answers. The faculty members discussed their own perceptions in a type of debriefing interview designed to bring initial hunches to the foreground for addressing researcher bias (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008).

The ATLAS.ti 9 qualitative software was used to store, organize, and categorize data. Consensus coding was used which means that the faculty read all the data and coded it all instead of splitting the data up. In vivo coding was used for first round coding in order to honor the participants voices (Saldana, 2016). In vivo codes were then reviewed and assessed for commonality. Between each round of coding, faculty discussed coded statements and compared thoughts. Data was discussed until there was consensus (Richards & Hemphill, 2018). Pattern coding was then used for second round coding to describe major themes in the data (Saldana, 2016). By continually analyzing the data, the themes were revised and refined. The team met again to come to consensus on coding. Next, the pattern codes were named with metaphors to capture the large amount of data in a single figure of speech (Miles et al., 2014). From here, a final codebook was created from previous codebooks to visually show the themes and examples from the data set (Appendix B). Inductive analysis and constant comparison were used throughout (Patton, 2002) as well as deductive analysis through the lens of occupational socialization theory (Patton, 2015). Each incident in the data was compared with other incidents to identify similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Merriam (2009) noted that the researcher can maximize trustworthiness by being systematic in understanding ethics of a study and carrying out the study in the most ethical manner possible. Therefore, pre-briefing occurred with the participants whereby the faculty-built rapport, encouraged honesty, the importance of full participation, and reassured that participant confidentiality would be maintained. Following the creation of themes, a member checking strategy was used. Participants reviewed the themes through email and confirmed that the information reflected their perspectives. A peer debriefing with a colleague outside of the study was also used to confirm that the themes reflect the data collected. Post-briefing occurred through dialogue after coding the major themes and findings. Throughout the process of CQA, both faculty members worked to come to agreement on themes. This method enhances trustworthiness through more than one analysts, while minimizing concerns associated with "coder variability, without attempting to quantify the qualitative data analysis process" (Patton, 2015; Richards & Hemphill, 2018, p. 230).

MEASURING ALUMNI PERCEPTIONS

A convenience sample was used whereby invitations were sent to alumni. Phase I of the study was recruiting alumni and obtaining the appropriate consents, including IRB approval. Participants from the year 2015 through 2018 (N = 375) were contacted via email with an invitation to participate in the study through a Google link. The survey contained open-ended questions with the last question asking for volunteers for focus group interviews. Participants who agreed to further discuss their thoughts were given a link to schedule a time. When a common time was found among alumni a Zoom link for participating in the interview was sent. Interviews used a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 8 questions to collect alumni perceptions (Appendix A). The same questions from the survey were to be ask during the interview and participants were aware of this to allow them the opportunity to answer more elaborately and provide examples, while still allowing the researcher to respond to questions or probe further (Mack et al., 2005; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes.

There were 6 male and 16 female participants for a total of 22 participants overall. Alumni represented 16 different school districts in Texas, one college, and one tutoring service. The schools ranged from rural to metroplex and included Title 1 and non-title schools. Alumni careers spanned all grade levels and a variety of subjects including special education, music, art, and physical education. Collecting data from a wide range of alumni was important to the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In relation to aim one and two, there were three themes concerning the impact from the EPP. Regarding aim number two, there was one major theme concerning relationships with alumni. The following four themes will be highlighted: relevant practice, influential community, unrealistic expectations, and meaningful partnership. These themes describe what the alumni experienced within the program as well as how that relates to their current situation. The results are compared between participants as well as to previous research findings. Themes connect to how the program can be improved in the future. The last section connects findings with OST.

RQ1: How did alumni perceive the EPP's preparation for teaching?

Theme 1: Relevant Practice

The first major theme found is relevant practice. Relevant practice asserts that alumni recognized application-based activities from the EPP helped make them successful. The field experience (mentor teachers, university supervisors, and others at the school) was cited

more times than anything else as being impactful. "Both of my mentor teachers were amazing! I feel like they both were the most impactful in who I am as a teacher. They got to know us, as a group and as individuals. My teachers, who I student taught under, my last semester, were also the most influential to my teaching style. They allowed me to watch them teach, a few days, and then let me have the lead! It gave me the most experience!" (Kristy). "My mentor from the intermediate was AMAZING! I also appreciated that everyone that taught that grade-level acted as a mentor to me as well. Even the principal was extremely supportive and helpful. That goes a long way. I would also like to mention the advice from my Clinical Supervisor was effective advice. She always told me a strength of mine that I should make sure to never lose. She also gave me constructive criticism in areas that would improve my overall effectiveness as a teacher. I grew so much during my clinical teaching experience." (Vera).

Alumni also cited courses and specific professors that were helpful in contributing to the type of teacher they became. Most agreed that lesson planning and practicing teaching with their peers was an important component in preparation. "The teacher preparation program helped me become a successful teacher in the lesson planning area. Although my lesson plans are not as elaborate as they were in college, I know the importance of incorporating an anticipatory set, guided practice, independent practice, differentiation, and closure. These things helped me with teaching now. The program also helped me learn various classroom management techniques and classroom organization." (Darla). "It gave me an opportunity to learn from my teachers when lesson planning and teaching my peers. I felt confident going into teaching. …We did the lesson plans and then we got to work with our like groups and team members. It was detailed teaching us how to find TEKS and align that with how we could prepare a lesson for our kids. …We were able to have our peers go out and perform our activity. So, we got to see how it would mess up and how we could overcome it at that time." (Hannah). "Coming out of the program into my first year I felt most prepared to create lesson plans and implement lesson plans, prepare a safe environment for students, and understand the educational philosophies I use to shape my everyday teaching." (Piper). Luke had commented that "the breakdown of childhood development has really been useful when assessing student outcomes" and Piper agreed that "the strong understanding of child development" gave her important elements to look for when teaching.

Alumni commented that the application-based activities in courses were more influential than courses that took tests and were filled with busy work. Natalie commented that the application-based activities "gave me the time and safe place to safely fail essentially practice being a teacher without risking it all and failing my students causing more harm than good". Kristy stated that "my classroom management and organization and planning lessons are the two things I feel like I mastered before entering the teaching profession. My professors prepared me for any situation". While Vera indicated "I actually feel like that's probably the one of the things that I was least prepared for, um, in the program" and this was due to less opportunities in her classes to practice those skills.

The findings from alumni that they preferred the application-based activities in courses fits with much research around the topic. Although lecture methods are considered to be a poor teaching practice, it is still commonly done in higher education (Miller & Metz, 2014; Patrick et al., 2016). Instead of passive learning (lecture style), active learning includes discussions, application-based activities, and collaborative work that engages students with the material and can stimulate them in knowledge and skill acquisition (Prince, 2004). Student learning outcomes and motivation are improved for those engaged in active learning (Bransford et al., 2020; Freeman et al., 2007). Students in active learning (flipped classes) outperformed those in the traditional lecture and they felt more engaged (Sarkar et al., 2020). The fact that alumni rated field experience as most valuable in their EPP fits with current

research (Geisler, 2017; Hushman et al., 2013). The importance of this will be discussed further in the deductive analysis through the lens of occupational socialization theory.

Theme 2: Influential Community

The second major theme revolves around Influential Community. Alumni placed emphasis on team collaboration in their workplace and the importance of learning this skill in an EPP. Many of the alumni felt prepared for the collaboration and communication skills that this requires. "I feel like I was prepared to work with my peers. I mean like me and Gia were in a lot of groups together. And so, there was about a group of five of us that really got to work closely together in a lot of classes. So, we knew this person was good at speaking and this person was really detail oriented. And so, I feel like being paired with the group that we had, we learned how to work with each other. So now, whenever we're in school, I work with my team, great." (Hannah). "Yeah. I agree with that, Hannah. We did a lot of like collaborating in like every class and it might be because, you're in a gym setting, you're doing everything together. I'm a people person. So, I think that's another reason why, um, we all worked so well together because all of us were that way. But, um, I would have to agree with that." (Gia). "We have just recently started doing PLC's at my school district, so it has been nice to collaborate and bounce ideas off the other science teachers. I felt prepared for this, as in the kinesiology department we often worked in groups to come up with a lesson plan or give each other feedback." (Finley).

Alumni that experienced opportunities to collaborate on planning and peer-teaching in the EPP felt prepared to work with a diverse group of co-workers in their school setting. As a preference towards collaboration gains prominence in schools, it is important for EPPs to prepare their teacher candidates for that environment. Educators are challenged to be collaborative with students and other teachers (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008). Some alumni felt that the practice needed to be enhanced at the university. Although he was involved in many group projects in school, Luke stated that "the program needs to implement more group projects and collaboration since PLCs are such a high focal point in education now a days".

A few other alumni chimed in that they also felt this was an area to strengthen. "I am a lead teacher, so I work daily with my team to plan and divide work. We analyze TEKS together and gather resources. I think I could have been better prepared with more team planning exercises where thoughts were more collaboratively shared, but I also know this practice does not reflect reality in every district you may teach in." (Piper). "We do curriculum meetings at work with the other teachers that teach the same subject. Group work at school could have been more productive if you were able to group students into content specific groups. I remember having classes with far too many elementary education majors." (Stephen). Caleb reasoned that working with others in a PLC is not a learned behavior "or at least not something you learn in books, but in the real world". Not only could peer collaboration be practiced in courses on-campus, but collaboration could be extended to field experiences. "I also don't think there was a huge emphasis on teamwork and collaboration in the work we did. We never got assigned to the same campus or to the same teacher. If we did, that may have helped us work as a team. That is, it would help to assign student teachers to the same classroom so that they can collaborate." (Zeke).

Often, teacher candidates are placed at schools with other peers and mentors but rarely is there a sanctioned assembly for peer mentoring or mentoring by other mentor teachers (Valencia et al., 2009). Giving the teacher candidates the opportunity to collaborate as peer mentors along with the mentor teachers would be a powerful opportunity. Students from the same EPP program have shared comparable experiences and have the necessary tools to support one another in the educational journey (Ambrosetti et al., 2017). As teacher candidates finish their teaching program and begin their careers, they will be spread throughout many locations and the goals of a peer mentoring program are to have teacher

candidates establish networks of friendships before graduating that they can carry into their careers for support (Tollefson-Hall, 2015).

RQ2: What challenges did alumni encounter and how prepared did they feel?
Theme 3: Unrealistic Expectations - Include subthemes:

- Workload and Communication
- Inclusive Practices
- Behavior Management
- Technology Integration
- Secondary Teacher Support

The third theme major theme found was Unrealistic Expectations. There was a pattern of concern that revealed some of the alumni entered the field of teaching with idealistic understandings about their jobs or simply were unaware of the time and effort allocated to various duties. Additionally, reflecting, alumni noted that in some areas the EPP had practices that were impractical in the real-world and that some courses had misplaced focuses. Alumni suggested it would be helpful to prepare our candidates for some of the realities they will face entering teaching. "The challenges that I've had are ones that the program can't fully prepare you for, such as the amount of paperwork that must be done in crunched time periods and sometimes having to work overtime to prepare everything that needs to be done." (Darla). The sentiment of understanding the workload and overwhelming professional development the first year was emphasized by many.

Another important concern was communication. Hannah said she initially needed help communicating with her administration and speaking up on behalf of her students' needs. Natalie and Gia furthered the conversation by saying that candidates should be prepared for lots of meetings and communication with parents as well. They felt that it can be hard to navigate those difficult conversations and it takes time to learn that skill. Other important topics to share with candidates included that not all schools have learning communities or mentors for first year teachers. In this case, it's important to search for a mentor and learn your resources quickly by asking questions. A resounding piece of advice was to remain flexible, don't expect perfection, and to find an appropriate work-life balance for your mental health.

Alumni felt that an area to address in the EPP was regarding unrealistic expectations with behavior. Several students felt that because the TExES Pedagogy and Responsibilities exam is based on an ideal classroom that sometimes their courses also discussed things from the same perspective. Brinn and Finley used the terms "perfect world" and "cookie-cutter" to describe the courses and then explained how that did not mirror their work experience. This situation caused two important issues. Issue number one was that students did not feel prepared for inclusive practices. Luke said, "there was no real in depth talk about that diversified learner." "I'm looking at IEPs accommodations every single day. I was not prepared to know how to implement those things. I felt like I was clueless when it came to, how do I service all these kids in the same classroom while I have my gen ed kids in there as well." (Piper). The importance of better preparing candidates to be inclusive was stressed by the group.

The second major issue from perfect world scenarios was that many felt unprepared for behavior problems. Erin stated that the extent of behavior in different children should be addressed as well as how to better handle a variety of behavior situations. "Behavior was a big challenge when I was in the classroom. Not necessarily classroom management, as I did well with managing the class. But I always had one or two kids that I struggled with certain behaviors constantly." (Rebecca). "Behavior management could be emphasized more. We… didn't really go through examples of it, which I know that's hard to do without being in a classroom with specific examples, but I think there was a way to incorporate. …And

not classroom management. Like specific student behavior management. Uh, and some of the different plans and resources that schools have." (Natalie).

Zeke added that mentor teachers always handled the behavior problems. He said, "I don't know if that one can be helped, but there is a WORLD of difference between being alone and handling the classroom on your own and having another teacher handle it for you." Additionally, for unrealistic expectations, alumni hoped to refocus some courses to benefit current candidates. As stated above, alumni felt relevant practice was important and any course that was not using application-based activities or not correlated with what the state is currently focusing on in education needed a realignment. Finley stated that there needs to be more of an emphasis on how to use technology in school such as google classroom or grading system so that the first-time teachers are not using these tools for the first time on day one. Piper and others agreed that technology usage is important, and they need more practice with the same programs school are using.

Although the practice of planning lessons in the EPP was given solid appreciation, alumni suggested important points to refocus. Beyond collaborative planning (as suggested in Influential Community) teacher candidates need practice with long-term planning. Alumni also stated that they spent a ton of time planning one lesson in university and that they simply do not have that kind of time in the real world. Candidates need to be prepared to plan lessons for every day for every subject or grade-level they work with. Alumni wished their instructors modeled the student-centered practices that they preached. Lastly, several students from the secondary and specials noted that they needed more support from the education department in their courses. There were teachers who did not have experience or examples for secondary or other subject scenarios for the candidates. Zeke pleaded, "PLEASE prioritize secondary teachers". Tracy added that she spent a lot of time learning about kindergarten for someone who isn't certified to teach those ages.

RQ3: How can the EPP continue supporting graduates?

Theme 4: Meaningful Partnership - Subthemes:

- Professional Development
- Alumni Networking
- Graduate Education
- Mentorship Opportunities

The fourth theme is the idea of Meaningful Partnership. There are many ways in which a university can continue to communicate with their alumni. The EPP alumni felt that the most valuable way for the program to remain involved with the alumni was to continue a relationship through an educational network. Multiple alumni are ready to come back to university to get a master's degree in education. Some alumni mentioned they would basically like to stay in touch or receive newsletters with new information in teaching. This keeps the connection simple and leaves the university merely as an informer of information instead of building relationships and valuing the information from the teacher alumni. Majority of the alumni supported the idea of professional development opportunities and connecting with other alumni.

Alumni discussed how university might help facilitate this and how this might be shaped. "Education is improving every year. New things are coming out. So even though some districts may be ahead, some are behind. Maybe have like year-to-year basis, like some sort of conference to just bring new things to the teachers or heck new ways of teaching or new product, I mean, anything can be brought to the attention to where we're up to date as well." (Gia). "Allowing us to meet with other people who are kind of in the same content areas as, so if you had like a continued education geared to content and then allow these teachers to be able to interact with each other" (Hannah). "Provide PD options for teachers in surrounding districts. Guidance on grant applications. Like collaboration of created

materials that we make ourselves. Like, I don't think I realized how awesome and sharing a lot of teachers are with their things that they create themselves." (Vera)

Even recruitment from the education department was suggested to be involved not only with alumni but potential future teachers. Maybe on certain college days in our sporting and (CTE) Career and Technical Education programs to have speakers or possibility maybe some things to intrigue these children to continue education. They tend to grasp things better from new people. Traditionally, university connections to alumni have been based on charitable contributions and volunteering but many alumni have little connection to their university post-graduation. We need to stop thinking of teaching as a pipeline and the EPP as the section that moves educators through their training. We must reexamine the cycle of student to alumni in order to move from thinking of them as consumer to valuing them as stakeholder (Gallo, 2013). The EPP needs to get involved in the engagement stage with alumni which involves reunions, continuing education courses, having alumni rejoin clubs, and other professional activities (Gallo, 2013), as this allows the alumni to not only grow but also provides the university opportunities to build relationships.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

Four interrelated themes emerged from the data. First, alumni consistently emphasized the importance of authentic, application-based learning experiences, particularly field experiences and mentoring relationships. Second, collaborative learning experiences contributed to graduates' ability to function effectively within professional learning communities. Third, alumni identified gaps between university preparation and the realities of professional practice, particularly regarding behavior management, inclusive instruction, and workplace expectations. Finally, alumni expressed a strong desire for sustained partnerships with the university beyond graduation. Together, these findings suggest that effective educator preparation extends beyond coursework and certification. Alumni experiences indicate that preparation programs should emphasize authentic practice, collaborative learning, realistic preparation for workplace challenges, and ongoing professional engagement. Viewed through the lens of Occupational Socialization Theory, the findings highlight how professional and organizational socialization continue beyond graduation and influence teachers' long-term professional development and retention.

LIMITATIONS

A limitation of this study is that a small percentage of alumni responded to the survey. However, qualitative case studies are usually smaller in sample size and the evidence outlined may help the reader find transferability and relevance to his/her setting. Another limitation could be researcher bias and the researchers' connections to participants as this could influence the interpretation of the data. The relationship between the participants and the researcher could mean there was participant bias which means a participant might provide the answer he/she thinks the researcher wants to hear. To avoid this, interview questions encouraged participants to provide their experience and feelings and were open-ended so as not to lead them. Participants listened to other students and were able to add to or disagree with their experiences. Clarification of researcher bias was also addressed to ensure trustworthiness. Peer debriefing was also used to certify that the themes found indeed matched the data.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

With regards to the themes found in this case study, there is work to be done to continue to continue to improve the EPP and the relationship with alumni. Due to field experiences being ranked by teacher candidates as one of the most influential parts of the EPP (Geisler, 2017; Hushman et al., 2013) The EPP needs to continue to focus on quality placements that

use best practices as well as using thoughtful consideration when matching mentors to teacher candidates (Russell & Russell, 2011; Wright & Grenier, 2018). The application-based activities that actively involve teacher candidates into the content and align with state standards should be continued and enhanced in all EPP courses as alumni found these valuable. Learning communities were heavily emphasized. Alumni found that although there was collaboration in the program that the occurrences need to be increased to better prepare candidates for working in learning communities. It was also suggested to extend collaboration into the field experiences. Not only can teacher candidates form professional relationships that may help them beyond college (Tollefson-Hall, 2015) but also teacher candidates can learn from each other and through collaborative cultures reduce the feelings of isolation (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008) that they may experience during field experience and even in their careers. Schools with professional learning communities can help reduce teacher isolation (Beddoes et al., 2014). Further, schools that successfully implement learning communities can be an influential agent in socializing novice and experienced teachers (Beddoes et al., 2014) which is important in keeping the cycle of education from becoming stagnant.

Areas for improvement included better preparing teachers for the some of the tough realities associated with first year teaching. Although this information can be conveyed to teacher candidates through faculty, the best way for candidates to learn this information is through experienced teachers themselves. Candidates can interview alumni or mentor teachers about numbers of hours worked, hardest parts of the job, etc. Two other areas that needed development were preparing students for inclusive environments and behavior problems. Both topics will be discussed by faculty to better engrain these into the curriculum. However, these topics are best learned in a real-world setting. Addressing these in the field will be an important component in fully preparing teacher candidates. Other suggestions from alumni on realigning courses and course activities will be addressed by a curriculum committee. Some of the work to improve the connection with specials and secondary has already begun. Further, many changes have taken place in the EPP since the alumni have graduated. Exit surveys or interviews will begin to gather information from current students and recent graduates to continue to use student feedback to better serve students.

Although the university works hard to connect with alumni, this study showed that the alumni want a connection specifically to the EPP and other teacher alumni. They were interested in how they could partner together for professional development opportunities. Several were interested in furthering their education and they were encouraged to do so. One professional development tool that was also discussed with the alumni in the interviews was for them to consider serving as a mentor as they have a wonderful understanding of expectations and reality in teaching. To move alumni into a level of engagement where they are seen as true stakeholders the EPP will begin to explore plans and opportunities for professional development and other networking activities suggested by the alumni. Moving to a more reciprocal partnership benefits both parties and enhances the growth and relationship of all involved.

The data regarding occupational socialization theory showed the importance of learning about teacher candidates' acculturation experience to be able to address areas that might not match best practices. When this is done, candidates are more likely to take what they learn in the professional stage as reality and not merely perfect world theory. With alumni emphasis on field experience this further supported the point on using quality mentors and matching mentors and candidates. Overall, this case study not only provides feedback that can strengthen the university's EPP to better prepare future teachers, but it also provides the possibility of enhancing the relationship with alumni and creating strong networks of professional practice.

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APPENDIX

INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. How did Lamar's Teacher Preparation Program help you become a successful teacher or employee (or how did it not)?
2. Do you feel that you were prepared to work in a variety of diverse settings?
3. What are some challenges you've encountered? Can you explain how the program did or did not prepare you for that?
4. How do you collaborate with your colleagues/learning community? Were you prepared for that kind of teamwork through our program or is this an area you see we could strengthen?
5. How are you growing as a professional?
6. What from our program had the greatest impact on the type of teacher you became: your Mentor from Clinical Teaching semester, another Mentor from internships, your University Supervisor, a particular course, Instructor, or activity from within the program?

7. Advice – tell us what you think first-year teachers really need to know or be prepared for? Or please share what you see lacking in new teachers coming in the field?
8. How might Lamar continue to support you in your career?