

**FUTURE EDUCATORS' PREPARATION AND WELL-BEING:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

Honors Thesis

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Abstract

This qualitative interview study examines the retrospective accounts of junior and senior undergraduate students enrolled in a teacher preparation program. A phenomenological research approach (Creswell, 2013) was utilized during the data collection process. Ten students were interviewed to explore their experiences with test anxiety, their experience with test preparation methods for the Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure (MTEL), and their overall well-being during their academic experiences. Four thematic categories emerged after the completion of the data analysis: variance in preparedness, discrepancies in informed attitudes, positive emotions, and negative emotions. These thematic categories were further analyzed to determine how much students believed their experiences helped them achieve passing scores on licensure examinations. Results are discussed in terms of measures that can be taken to improve the overall well-being of students while they are enrolled within the preparation program.

Keywords: Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure, phenomenological research approach, qualitative study, retrospective accounts, well-being

Future Educator' Preparation and Well-Being:
A Qualitative Study

Context of the Research Study

Undergraduate students enrolled in educator preparation programs throughout the United States, who desire to become licensed educators in public school districts, complete similar preparation courses in educational theory, pedagogy, and teaching methods. Prospective pre-K-through-grade-12 educators complete courses in undergraduate programs, which provide instruction designed to help future educators to become knowledgeable and informed teachers in the field. In conjunction with the successful completion of the educator preparation courses and student teaching experiences, educators must also achieve passing scores on high-stakes state licensure examinations. The licensure tests are used by states to ensure the teachers who are teaching within the public schools are competent in both content knowledge and teaching methodology.

Limited research has been conducted in relation to how licensure candidates within a teacher preparation program prepare for licensure examinations. The present qualitative interview study will examine how teacher candidates experience preparation initiatives for the licensure examinations. Two research questions will guide the research: What are student experiences in the teacher preparation program, in relation to Massachusetts Test for Educator Licensure preparation? How would students retrospectively describe their well-being during course enrollment in the teacher preparation program?¹ This study explores the examination preparation for the teacher licensure examinations at one Massachusetts state university.

¹ This study refers to undergraduate teacher preparation programs and licensure examination preparation initiatives, hereafter called "preparation programs" and "exam preparation."

Participants' reported overall well-being during enrollment will also be explored, as well as their experiences with test anxiety. Several areas of the literature informed these research questions and will be briefly reviewed here.

The Need for Quality Educators and Preparation Programs

In an era of accountability, teachers are held responsible for the work students produce and the test scores students achieve. Teachers entering the field must be able to effectively deliver lessons that achieve the curriculum standards and guidelines outlined by the states, while also being able to adequately prepare students within their classrooms to meet the educational standards. To ensure that teachers are able to meet the demands of high-stakes testing in schools, teacher preparation programs are held accountable for the quality of teachers who enter the field. As part of the teacher preparation program, future educators learn how to teach, but they may also learn how to successfully pass the licensure examinations. According to the Educational Testing Service, the organization responsible for the Praxis series teacher examinations, 48 states use the examination to inform licensing decisions (Educational Testing Service, 2017).

The wide usage of such examinations has been called into question, generating some controversy within the field of teacher educator preparation. The licensing test requirement imposed by states has caused individuals to question whether the quality of teachers entering the field has been raised due to the high-stakes testing contingencies. Angist and Guryan (2004, 2008) concluded the testing requirements are not an effective measure of teacher preparation and quality. These authors (2004) determined that traditionally prepared educators may pass the licensure exams, but the cut-scores for the licensure exams may not serve as an adequate evaluation of teacher effectiveness. In fact, according to Wakefield (2003), preparation programs may in fact be preparing academically low achieving students to pass the licensure exams.

Preparation programs must take the time to evaluate the preparation methods used, so as to play their part in ensuring future educators are able to meet the licensure testing demands and the teaching demands of current classrooms. Goodman, Arbona, and Dominguez de Rameriz (2008) examined associations between teacher performance portfolios, professional attributes questionnaires, and the Texas general elementary comprehensive exam. Teaching performance and attributes were significantly related, as were portfolios and attributes, but there was no significance association between the licensure exam and teacher performance. These findings raise important questions for current preparation programs in terms of the methods used to prepare future educators, as the exams may not be a valid measure of teacher educator preparation and teaching performance. Balancing methodology instruction and examination preparation then becomes an area of interest for teacher preparation programs.

Some preparation programs, such as those in California, have sought to ensure teachers entering the field are highly prepared and qualified. The use of portfolios, field observations, and an evaluation of strengths and weakness while teaching help to inform whether the future educator is prepared to enter the field (Recheone and Chung, 2006). This alternative to standardized testing provides a full overview of the educators' strengths and weaknesses in the field, while also providing an assessment of teaching methods. While standardized testing is not completely eliminated, the use of the alternative assessments ensures the teachers who enter the field are fully qualified, instead of relying on just a testing score to inform the licensing decision.

Some researchers have found that alternative certification requirements do not limit minority educators from entering the field the way that standardized testing does (Angist & Guryan, 2008; Goodman et al., 2008; Wakefield, 2003). These researchers found that the representation of minority and low income students passing the certification exams was rather

low in comparison to Anglo/Caucasian test takers. The licensure exams have attempted to screen for highly qualified teachers, yet they have fallen short. To ensure students remain motivated to achieve the testing standards, faculty can provide a combination of educational experiences within the classroom and an understanding of the testing requirements and expectations. The educational expectations must be clearly outlined to students to ensure they are able to achieve the testing and teaching expectations. An emphasis on clinical practice and test preparation may be one way to maintain student motivation (Norris, 2013).

Despite the success of alternative methods for assessing educators' readiness, high-stakes licensure examinations remain an important part of the general landscapes in the United States, specifically in Massachusetts where the current study was conducted.

Licensure Examination Preparation Methods

As previously stated, undergraduate students enrolled in a teacher preparation program must often prepare for licensure examinations in some way, as part of enrollment. The ways in which faculty members and preparation programs help to prepare students for success on the examinations can lead to passing licensure scores. Informing future educators about the test and test-taking strategies through forums, workshops, and regular classroom discussions has been shown to improve understanding of the test and the expectations to achieve licensure. The exposure to the test environment has also been shown to be beneficial to student success in a high-stakes testing environment (Childs, Ross & Jaciw, 2002). Exposing students to testing objectives and time-management strategies has led to further success on high-stakes tests. Faculty members who are preparing students to achieve passing licensure scores must also be proficient in the content knowledge that will be assessed, as well as the assessment tool used to measure teacher candidate preparation (Gulek, 2003). Allowing teacher candidates to review test

taking strategies and previous licensure examinations, and holding content review sessions, have also been shown to increase success on examinations. It has been suggested that the undergraduate curriculum should embed test-taking methodology, to create an authentic and meaningful learning experience for students enrolled in a preparation program (Miyasaka, 2000). The discussed strategies focus on the teacher preparation curriculum, and how the use of such strategies may increase the likelihood of passing the licensure examinations.

Test-taking tutoring sessions have been studied to determine the effectiveness of such programs on licensure examination results. One method reviewed bears the acronym T.E.S.T: translate, eliminate, solve or substitute, and tricks. In one study performed by Wall (2008), it was concluded participating in the T.E.S.T program increased mathematics and composite scores on teacher preparation examinations. Wall, Johnson, & Seymonds (2012) outlined a theoretical model to present the T.E.S.T strategies to students. They suggest presenting the strategies in student seminars would reduce testing anxiety, while increasing content knowledge and self-efficacy. Although the T.E.S.T strategies were reviewed during the 2008 study, the theoretical framework for executing the program is minimally reviewed for effectiveness.

Other tutoring sessions have been shown to help prepare students to pass examinations. In one study (Mee, 2000), students were provided with an authentic test-taking environment and content anticipated to be on the exams. The faculty members who arranged the test preparation program for the Praxis II content exam had taken the test and developed the program based on student experiences. Those students enrolled in the tutoring program had an 88% percent pass rate on the first try, in comparison to the 77% pass rate of those students who were not enrolled in the program. In another tutoring program for the Praxis I (Lonwell-Grice, Mcilheran, Schroeder, & Scheele, 2013), pre- and post-tests were used to determine the effectiveness of

mathematical tutoring sessions on student success. Students who had only minimal areas of need were more successful on the examinations than those students who needed large margins of improvement. The use of pre- and post-test evaluations was determined to be an effective measure of student success, but the use of one 45-minute tutoring session proved to be useful for only the students who had little to improve on. The discussed tutoring sessions provide limited information about student success on examinations, in relation to student participation.

Psychological and Emotional Considerations

In association with the high-stake tests that licensure candidates must complete, students can experience testing anxiety, as well as a reduction in their overall well-being. There have been numerous studies which have examined test anxiety and the reduction of such symptoms, yet limited research has examined the effectiveness of anxiety reduction in teacher preparation programs in relation to licensure examination preparation. Previous studies have also reported seminars and faculty support have been shown to increase student motivation to achieve success on licensure examinations (Baker-Doyle & Petchauer, 2015; Norris, 2013). Test anxiety and performance on examinations have been correlated with one another, predicting performance success. An individual who expresses optimistic views, who has more self-esteem, and works to achieve mastery will have a greater sense of well-being, or a sense of coherence. The lack of a sense of coherence has been negatively correlated with performance and emotion focused coping, avoidance, and test anxiety. If an individual had a higher sense of coherence, test anxiety was much lower (Cohen, Ben-Zur, & Rosenfeld, 2008). In a meta-analysis performed, programs that used cognitive and skill focused techniques and behavioral and skill focused techniques were able to reduce testing anxiety the most. Programs that offered physical activity or meditation as a mean to reduce testing anxiety did not effectively reduce testing anxiety levels

(Ergene, 2003). While looking at testing anxiety, perceived stress levels, and personal burnout over the course of a semester, it was concluded undergraduate students exposed to the stress management condition had the greatest reduction in stress, burnout, and test anxiety.

Cardiovascular fitness was able to help some students reduce their levels of stress, but personal burnout increased as a result. The use of stress management techniques can be beneficial to students throughout the course of a semester, especially if they are used in combination with other stress reduction techniques (Baghurst & Kelley, 2014).

If students are unable to achieve passing scores on the licensure examinations the motivation of students to continue to pursue licensure may be reduced. Student motivation to achieve passing licensure scores was examined by Norris (2013), but motivation was reflected by the amount of test anxiety and the aspects of the test-taking environment. Students who are more motivated to achieve a specific grade are able to successfully cope with a stressful academic event. Professors who provide a supportive and encouraging environment can help students to maintain motivation to achieve success. Professors are not the only source of advice and motivation. Students seek the advice of their peers in relation to teacher licensure test-taking strategies. Students who acknowledge their learning needs and are able to seek support from trusted peers, has positively contributed to exam success. Test preparation seminars have also been shown to contribute to exam persistence and success (Baker-Doyle and Petchauer, 2015).

An understanding of the balance between leisure activities and academic expectations, and the use of effective time-management strategies, have also been shown to effectively reduce and minimize academic stress students may experience (Misra and McKean, 2000). The instruction of such strategies is of great benefit to students. Problem-focused coping has been shown to effectively reduce stress and to maintain student motivation towards academic success

(Ward Struthers, Perry, & Menece, 2000). Further aspects of the testing environment can greatly impact student achievement and motivation to succeed. If the testing environment is perceived to be highly evaluative, as it is in high-stakes testing centers, then student achievement may be low, especially if high testing anxiety is a factor. Students with high test anxiety, however may still be motivated to achieve passing scores (Hancock, 2001). As addressed by Childs et al.'s (2002) study, exposure to the testing environment can help to reduce anxiety levels and increase student achievement. Some tutoring sessions have examined the reduction of test anxiety, as in the studies performed by Mee (2000) and Wall, et al. (2012), but there is a lack of sufficient evidence to fully support the use of such programs for test anxiety reduction.

Methodology

Participants

Participants in this research study included undergraduate students in a preparation program for elementary education. Ten students participated in the research study. At the university in which participants were recruited, participants enrolled in the preparation program must have a second major in addition to the education major. There were two undergraduate participants who were English double-majors, two Psychology double-majors, and two Geography double-majors who participated in the interview. The other participants were double majors enrolled in an American Studies, Political Science, Sociology, or History programs. Four participants were seniors, and six participants were juniors. All research participants were female and between 20 and 22 years of age.

Recruitment and Procedures

Participating undergraduate students were recruited from a public university located in the Northeast. In order to be eligible to participate in the study, participants needed to be of junior or senior undergraduate status, and enrolled in the teacher education preparation program for elementary educators. Requests for participation were made through email communication and in-person requests. Those participants who were interested in participating were then informed of the aims of the study.

Modifying Baker-Doyle and Petchauer's (2015) qualitative research design, which used focus group interviews to gain information, participants completed a one-on-one interview in which they were asked to answer questions about their educational experiences and examination preparation methods. Participants were asked about their experiences with licensure examination preparation within the educator preparation program, the ways they prepared for the examinations, and their overall experiences with the examinations, specifically in relation to feelings of test anxiety the participant may have experienced. Participants were also asked to indicate times of higher vs. lower well-being while enrolled in the preparation program.

Interviews, ranging in duration from 20 to 40 minutes, were conducted in private, or semi-private spaces within the library of the university. With the permission of student participants, the interviewer took notes. Participants were required to sign a written informed consent form. Participants in this research study did not receive any form of compensation for their time.

Participants were asked to bring a printed copy of their completed coursework to the interview, from the university's online student portal. Participant records were marked with a number 001 through 010 by the researcher, and participants voided name and grade information using a permanent marker to ensure responses did not include any identifying information.

During the interview, participants were asked to reference their coursework sheets to help them to recall their retrospective experiences. At the start of the interview process, participants used a pen to make distinguishing lines between fall and spring semesters. Questions were then posed to participants that asked them to recall certain experiences they had within the preparation program. To help the researcher to analyze the data, and to aid interviewees in recalling past course enrollment experiences, participants were asked to use a pen to circle courses that mentioned the licensure examinations and helped them gain an understanding of the examinations that needed to be completed and the content that would be on the tests. A star was used to indicate the courses that had a focus on preparing students for the examinations. Participants were also asked to write when they completed licensure examinations, to indicate periods of high well-being with a blue marker, and to indicate periods of low well-being. After marking the course enrollment sheet, they were asked to elaborate on the causes of high and low well-being ratings.

Measures. A phenomenological research design was applied to this qualitative research study (Creswell, 2013). The use of a phenomenological design seeks to “describe the meaning of the phenomenon for a small number of individuals who have experienced it” (Creswell, 2013). The researcher, also enrolled in the preparation program, sought to gain some information about other student experiences through the interview process. This analytical approach was utilized in the study with an eye towards recommending improvements in the program to help students earn passing scores on licensure examinations.

Licensure examination success. Examination success was measured to gain a better sense of the pass-fail rate after completing the licensure exams. Prior to being granted the opportunity to student teach, students must complete and pass three licensure examinations that test student

competence in areas of reading, writing, mathematics, and general knowledge. Participants were asked to recall the specific licensure examinations that they had attempted, how many times the exams were attempted, and if applicable, if they had attempted the subtests at different allocated testing times. Two examinations provide the participants with the opportunity to take the subtests on two different occasions, or they are able to complete both subtests during the same testing session.

Course enrollment preparation. In order to explore the relationships between specific course enrollment, student knowledge about the examinations, and the passing rates of licensure examinations, participants were asked to recall specific courses they felt helped them to gain an understanding about the licensure exams. Participants were also asked to recall whether or not there were specific courses may have helped to prepare them to complete and pass the exams. They were asked to indicate on their course enrollment sheets any course they were enrolled in that mentioned the examinations. Research participants were also asked to indicate the courses they felt helped them to complete the tests, and they were asked to specifically identify the tests that were mentioned, and the tests they were most prepared to complete.

Examination preparation methods. Participants were asked to recall the preparation methods they utilized to help them to prepare for the licensure examinations. To assist participants in recalling preparation methods used, preparation workshops offered by the School of Education were explained, as well as the purpose of the workshops. Participants were then asked to recall if they had ever attended the test preparation workshops offered, tutoring sessions, or if they participated in other preparation methods, such as studying, or utilizing workbooks. Participants were asked to indicate if they attended all the workshop sessions, and to rate their overall

experiences on a scale between 1 (ineffective/unhelpful)-5 (effective/helpful) if they attended the sessions.

Test anxiety and well-being. Participants were not overtly asked if they ever experienced test anxiety while completing the licensure examinations. Instead, participants were asked whether, or not they experienced a lack of confidence in their academic abilities or nervousness while testing. In answering this question, participants indicated if they had ever experienced symptoms of test anxiety while completing the exams. Low and high well-being ratings were assessed when participants were asked to indicate times they felt most uncomfortable and unhappy during their course enrollment, and the times they felt most happy and comfortable within the program.

Response coding. Similar to the coding of participant responses that Baker-Doyle and Petchauer (2015) utilized in their research study, participant responses were coded to determine the relationship between pass-fail rates, and course enrollment, examination preparation methods, feelings of testing anxiety, and the self-reported times of well-being. For each examination the participant completed, a code of 1 indicated the participant spent little time preparing, while a code of 2 indicated the student was proactive in preparing for the examination, utilizing the offered resources, attending tutoring sessions, or accessing workbooks. A code of 1 for test anxiety indicated students experienced no symptoms of test anxiety. Students who experienced test anxiety received a code of 2. The relationship between test anxiety and preparation was then examined. Fluctuations between well-being scores was also examined to determine if there were any common themes in student responses. Commonalities and patterns between examination preparation methods, course enrollment, test anxiety, well-being scores, and pass-fail rates were examined.

Results

In order to conduct analysis of the notes and other documents from the qualitative interviews, a three-step process was used: open-coding, conceptual mapping, and identification of thematic categories. Adapted from Strauss & Corbin (1998) and utilized by Harry, Klinger, & Sturges (2005), an open coding procedure was used to determine an initial list of codes. This first step allowed the researcher to make-sense of the data. In following this procedure, an understanding of participants' meaning making concepts began to emerge. To begin the initial analysis, the researcher enlisted the help of a research assistant who completed a line-by-line analysis of the text notes from each interview, summarizing each line with a word or phrase. The phrases or words were then reviewed by the researcher to determine common elements. The next step in the data analysis was to complete a conceptual outline map. The initial codes were compared to and contrasted with one another in order to develop clusters of similar concepts. For example, anxiety, pressure, confused, worried, stress, and overwhelmed were all phrases that were grouped with one another.

The Thematic Categories

The final step in the process identified thematic categories, and four emerged: variance in preparedness, discrepancies in informed attitudes, positive emotions, and negative emotions. Further analysis revealed the interconnectedness among categories. For example, responses of positive or negative emotions changing were related to how prepared and informed the participants felt when taking the licensure examinations.

Variance in preparedness. The licensure requirements for elementary educators in the preparation program are quite rigorous. To achieve passing scores on the licensure exams, many participants enrolled in workshops, completed courses within the School of Education, and

purchased study materials to help them pass the exams for state licensure. Each participant prepared for each exam slightly differently, depending on how confident they were when signing up for the exam, and how familiar they were with the content of the exam. For example, participants 001, 002, 003, and 007 either purchased study materials from a local retailer, or borrowed study books from a library, while others used online sample tests.

Enrollment in preparation “boot-camps” was another strategy participants reported; these intensive workshops were offered by their university’s School of Education (participants 007, 009, and 010). Of note, most enrollments in the boot-camps took place after participants failed the initial MTEL examination. For example, participant 001, 003, and 006 completed and attended all boot-camp sessions after they each failed the Foundations of Reading test. Participants 002 completed the boot-camp for math, but found the tutoring sessions were not helpful, and were unable to meet her learning needs at the time. She then sought the help of a faculty member at the university, and eventually she enrolled in a tutoring program offered outside of the university.

Overall, participants found the boot-camps met their expectations and study needs for the Foundations of Reading and Communication and Literacy exam, but the other boot-camps did not offer the same support. There was general a consensus among participants that the boot-camps for the Communication and Literacy and Foundations of Reading examinations offered the most support in comparison to the study sessions offered for the General Curriculum subtest or the mathematics subtest.

Participants 001, 007, 009, 010 attended all tutoring sessions that pertained to the Communication and Literacy boot-camp. Those who attended the sessions for the Communication and Literacy examination were highly satisfied with the help they received. The

Foundations of Reading sessions were ranked on a sliding scale, ranging from highly satisfaction to moderate satisfaction with the tutoring sessions. Those who attended the Foundations of Reading boot-camp sessions participated in all tutoring sessions. Participant 001 was highly satisfied, participant 003 was satisfied with the sessions, and participant 006 was moderately satisfied with the tutoring sessions. Participant 003 stated the content was helpful, but cited the need for an intensive boot-camp, instead of weekly-sessions that span over the course of the semester. Participant 006 stated, in comparison to the math tutoring sessions, she felt more comfortable during the sessions, because they were not directed by a student. The math boot-camp was ranked much lower in relation to the other tutoring sessions. Participants 006, 007, and 010 were highly dissatisfied with the tutoring sessions. Participant 010 enrolled into the math boot-camp twice, although the examination was not attempted. The second time enrolling in the boot camp, she was moderately satisfied with the sessions. Participant 002 was also moderately satisfied. Both participant 002 and 006 attended outside tutoring sessions to meet their studying needs. Participant 006 stated many students enrolled in the boot-camp sessions stopped attending, but she continued, while participant 002 and 007 said they stopped attending the sessions.

Those participants who attended the sessions for the mathematics sub-test were asked to elaborate on the reasons for the low score. Participants suggested the mathematics boot-camp was not as effective as either the Foundations of Reading boot-camp or the Communication and Literacy boot-camp, because the sessions were facilitated by a student enrolled in either the education preparation program or in the math department. The student-facilitated sessions were either too slow for the learning needs of the participants, or explicit instruction was not provided. The student facilitator, from the mathematics department at the university, was not familiar with

the format and structure of the examinations, contributing to further confusion for those preparing for the test. The sessions focused on mathematical theory, but education majors may benefit more from less theoretical and more specific problem-solving strategies during the tutoring sessions. During the other sessions led by the student facilitator enrolled in the educator preparation program, who was more familiar with the structure of the MTEL, it was noted the instructor expressed little interest in teaching the course, and the structure and format of the exam was not reviewed during the tutoring sessions.

Participants were also asked if they felt they were prepared to take the MTEL examinations. Participants 001, 007, 008, 009 and 010 stated they felt prepared to take the exams. Participant 006 thought she was prepared to take the Foundations of Reading MTEL, but failed the test, then enrolled in a class outside of the university to become more prepared for retaking the test. She felt prepared for the Communication and Literacy test, but she was not well prepared to take the General Curriculum or Mathematics subtests. Participants 002, 004, and 007 stated they felt prepared to take the Communication and Literacy, Foundations of Reading, and Mathematics sub-tests, but they were not prepared for the General Curriculum subtest. They cited the Foundations of Reading, Communication and Literacy, and Mathematics subtest had courses that connected the theories and course content to the questions and would be on the examinations, in contrast to the General Curriculum test, which contained interdisciplinary content and teaching practices were not addressed throughout their course enrollment. Participant 3 stated she was not made aware of how to use and apply the information learned in class to then help to prepare her for the MTEL examinations. She indicated she was not prepared to complete any of the licensure examinations.

Discrepancies in informed attitudes. Since students enrolled in the preparation program must complete the required licensure examinations before they are eligible to complete their pre-practicum placement and student teaching, participants were asked to indicate if they were informed of the deadlines that needed to be met and when they needed to obtain completed and passed licensure examination scores. Participants 001, 002, 004, and 009 indicated they were informed about the examinations they needed to complete, as well as the deadlines that needed to be met. Participants 001, 002, 007, 009, and 010 indicated the courses they were enrolled in, as well as the orientation program, helped to inform them about the testing expectations. Participant 004 attributed her success to her communication with her advisor within the School of Education, as well as her own self-motivation for success.

Other participants in the study were not as well informed about the testing expectations. Participants 003, 005, 006, 007, 008, and 010 indicated they were not informed of the tests and or deadlines that needed to be met. A lack of explicit instruction about the tests and deadlines was not provided. Some of the tests were briefly discussed, but explicit instructions were not provided to help to inform the students of the necessary deadlines. Participants suggested a form with specific dates and instructions about the upcoming deadlines would have benefited them while enrolled in the preparation program. Participant 008 also indicated professors within the department were not as knowledgeable about the examinations that need to be passed. Instead, the professors and advisors focused on the Communication and Literacy examination and Foundations of Reading examination, while the General Curriculum test is overlooked. Those participants, 007 and 010, who were exposed to the testing expectations in the orientation meeting, said it was overwhelming to learn about the information during the session.

To assist in assessing how and when participants were made aware of the MTEL examinations, participants were asked to indicate the courses that mentioned the tests, the tests that were mentioned, and the courses helped prepare them for the examinations. The first course that exposed most students to the examinations was EDU 100, Premise of School. Participants 001, 002, 003, 004, 005, and 007 all stated the course mentioned the Communication and Literacy MTEL and the professors required those enrolled in the course to take a practice test. After completing the course, participant 002 and 003 stated the course made each of them more knowledgeable about the MTELS needed, and participant 003 stated taking the practice test as the final for the course helped to prepare her for the test.

There are two required courses that offer instruction pertaining to math skills and knowledge: MAT 123 and MAT 124, Math for Elementary Teachers. Participants 001, 004, 005, 008, and 010 stated both courses mentioned the examination. Participant 003 indicated MAT 124 was the only math course that had mentioned the subtest. According to participants 001, 003, 0404, and 005, both of those math courses helped to prepare them to take the examinations, but participant 010 indicated MAT 123 was the only course that helped to prepare her for the examination.

There were several courses that informed participants about the Foundations of Reading MTEL, including EDU 250A, Language and Literacy Development; EDU 300, Teaching Reading, Language, and Literature; EDC 400, Literacy Development I; and EDC 406, Literacy Development II. The professors for those courses included test questions in PowerPoint presentations, referenced the examination, and included a practice examination to be submitted at the end of the semester. Participants, 005, 006, 007 009, and 010, indicated EDC 400 helped to prepare them for the Foundations of Reading MTEL. EDU 300 helped participant 003 prepare

for the Foundations of Reading examination. Many of the research participants reported that the courses offered some support for the examination.

Another course that was mentioned that helped to prepare students for the MTELEs was ENL 307E, Foundations of ESL. This course helped to prepare participants 002 and 007 to answer questions about how to modify instruction to meet the varying needs of students within the classroom. Teaching Learning, and Assessment, EDU 208A, mentioned the MTELEs and assisted participants 005 and 007 in preparing for the examinations. Other courses mentioned the MTELEs in a more general sense included, EDU 310, Urban Education; PSY 251, Child Development; EDC 451, Field Seminar I for Elementary; EDU 309, Social Studies Methods; and EDU 346, Science in Elementary School with Field Placement. The tests were referenced at some time during the semester, but MTEL instruction was not the focus of the course.

Positive emotions. During the interview, participants were asked to indicate their times of highest well-being during the preparation program. Results are summarized in Table 1. Participants 001, 005, 007, 009, and 010 reported the highest of well-being for those semesters in which they felt they could concentrate and focus on the courses within the education concentration. Those participants also mentioned that, during the semester with the highest well-being scores, their professors were very involved in educating the students in the course content and as well as, generating a sense of community within the classroom environment. Participants 003, 004, and 006 also stated the professors positively influenced their time and preparation within the program.

Participant 010 discussed she was most happy after she had received the passing score on the Foundations of Reading MTEL. After receiving that score, she then felt much more confident in her ability to continue in the program. Participants 003 and 006 mentioned they were most

happy before the stress and deadlines of the MTEL examinations lingering over them. Another common topic discussed during the interview was the support of others. Participants 004, 005, and 009 stated they were supported by family members while they were completing the program, they were able to be more involved in on-campus activities, and they were able to adjust to the processes and procedures of the university. The support of family, friends, and peers positively contributed to their success in the program.

Negative emotions. Participants were asked to indicate whether they had ever experienced a sense of worry or if they were nervous while completing the licensure examinations. Results are summarized in Table 1. Participants 006 and 008 did not indicate they had experienced those feelings while testing, while Participants 001, 002, 003, 004, 005, 007, 009, and 010 stated they had felt worried or nervous while testing. To overcome some of those feelings, participant 001, 002, 004, 005, 007, and 009 looked to friends, parents, family members, or counselors for support. Participants 003 and 010 described the use of elimination or skip strategies they had previously learned in classes to overcome the feelings of worry and nervousness that they experienced while testing.

Several participants (001, 003, and 005) stated that their well-being was lowered because of concerns about not passing MTELEs and feeling unprepared. Other participants (004, 005, 006, 007, and 008) discussed how poor classroom environment and teaching strategies contributed to lower well-being. Since the School of Education requires students to have a dual major, some participants were enrolled in a strenuous course load. Participants 002 and 003 noted the workload of being enrolled six courses was a lot to manage. Other factors that contributed to negative well-being ratings were family, friend, or personal issues (Participants 001, 005, and

007), such as mental health concerns, ill family members, and interpersonal difficulties with friends.

Each examination has a fee associated with testing. Several participants (002, 004, 005, 006, 007, and 009) mentioned the financial burdens of the MTEL tests, the fees for which are at least \$390 if all sub-tests are completed during the same testing time. Of course, there are additional costs if tests need to be re-taken.²

Participant 002 explained during the interview there is no financial assistance offered to help teacher candidates cover the expenses of the tests. Participant 004 recognized there is a lot at stake when taking the examinations, including the financial costs of paying for the tests, while also recognizing she would not want to have to pay for the tests multiple times should she fail. Participant 005 explained failure to pass the MTELS may result in more time spent in the teacher preparation, costing even more money to complete the program, because student teaching cannot be completed until all MTEL examinations are passed. Participants 006 and 009 explained if they were to fail the examination, it could waste about \$130, and participant 006 reported that she had saved upwards of \$2000 to prepare for the tests and that she attended outside tutoring sessions, which cost about \$400. This participant reported that since passing the MTELS is the only means to becoming an educator, she was willing to pay any cost.

Participant 007 and 009 had a different perspective on the fees associated with workshops and tutoring sessions. The School of Education has opted to attach a small fee to the tutoring

² The General Curriculum test, including the mathematics and multi-subject examination, costs \$139, or \$94 for the mathematics sub-test and \$94 for the multi-subject sub-test. The Foundations of Reading MTEL costs \$139 to complete, and the Communication and Literacy tests cost \$112 for both the reading and writing subtests, or \$75 for the reading sub-test, and \$85 for the writing sub-test.

sessions, but 007 and 009 argued the MTELEs are already extremely expensive, and the tutoring sessions should be free to all students. 009 said she would most likely not attend those sessions if a small fee of attendance was charged.

Participants 007 and 009 had a different perspective on the fees associated with workshops and tutoring sessions. Participants 007 and 009 argued that although the MTELEs are needed to achieve state licensure and boot-camps have been beneficial in preparing them for the examinations, they noted it is not necessary for an additional fee to be charged to enroll in tutoring sessions. They explained the MTELEs are already extremely expensive, and the tutoring sessions should be free to all students. Participant 009 said she would most likely not attend boot-camp sessions if a small fee of attendance was charged, due to the added financial burdens associated with testing.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this research was to explore students' general experiences in a teacher preparation program, with a specific focus on their experiences with preparing for licensure examinations. Two research questions were posed: What are student experiences in the teacher preparation program, in relation to MTELE preparation? How would students describe their well-being during their course enrollment in the teacher preparation program? The findings offer new insights and a greater understanding of the needs of undergraduate students enrolled in an educator preparation program, in relation to MTELE preparation and well-being. The qualitative analysis for this study revealed four themes participants' experiences: variance in preparedness, discrepancies in informed attitudes, negative emotions, and positive emotions.

It was not surprising that student participants had varied experiences when preparing for licensure examinations, with some reporting feeling prepared for all examinations, and others

reporting not feeling adequately prepared for the General Curriculum multi-subject sub-test. That said, these findings provide general support for the usefulness of boot-camp preparation sessions, as suggested by other researchers (Childs, et al., 2003; Mee, 2000). Students who participated in boot-camp sessions were exposed to practice test questions, the format of the examination, and the testing conditions. Although several participants enrolled in boot-camp sessions after they attempted and failed the examinations, the sessions helped to increase the confidence, content knowledge, and future success on the licensure examinations of the participants. Exposure to the testing conditions helped to inform participants of what would be expected on the MTEL examinations, further increasing participant success.

The workshops offered for the Communication and Literacy and Foundations of Reading MTEL provided participants with more effective review sessions, in comparison to the sessions offered for the Mathematics sub-test. Participants stated the pace of the review sessions, as well as the content studied clearly related to the content of the examination they prepared for. The Mathematics sessions provided participants with less preparation for the sub-test. Since the sessions were either led by a student in the mathematics department, who was familiar with the content of the examination but not the format, or a student who was enrolled in the education department, who was knowledgeable about the content and the format of the examination, it was surprising to learn that the session did not offer the same support as the other tutoring sessions. Although there is general support in the literature for the potential of peer-led support, (Lonwell-Grice, et. al., 2013; Baker-Doyle and Petchauer, 2015), it may be that peers helping with licensure examination preparation need to be more specifically trained and more closely monitored or supported by faculty, or other professionals.

There was similar variation in how informed participants were about the examinations, and the deadlines that must be met. An important finding was that the majority of participants indicated the information presented at their orientation meeting was overwhelming, making it difficult to understand and remember. Participants suggested a guideline sheet be developed, with explicit communication about the deadlines and MTEL examinations that must be completed by the end of the preparation program. Those participants who stated they were informed about the MTEL examinations also indicated some courses explicitly mentioned the MTEL examinations, provided sample questions, and embedded examination questions in the courses instruction, a practice shown to be effective (Miyasaka, 2000).

It is also noteworthy that participants who felt less prepared reported that some faculty members who prepared participants for the examinations were proficient in the content that would be assessed, but they were not as knowledgeable about the examinations and procedures. Faculty members who are better informed about the procedures and examinations can further support students enrolled in the preparation program (Gulek, 2003). To better assist students, faculty members should be provided with clear, consistent, and accurate information, in regards to the MTEL tests, testing procedure, and deadlines.

The relationships participants had with their peers and family members contributed both positively and negatively to their well-being. Those participants who successfully looked to peers and family members for support, experienced higher levels of well-being (Baker-Doyle and Petchauer, 2015) in comparison to those participants who were unable to seek examination support and advice from peers and family members. The support network of participants within the preparation program has been shown to influence the well-being of those individuals (Baker-Doyle and Petchauer, 2015). A strong and supportive network of friends and family members

helped those enrolled in the preparation program to overcome negative feelings and experiences, in relation to MTEL preparation.

Many participants reported experiencing test anxiety with regard to the licensure exam. Those students who did not experience test taking anxiety were far more motivated to successfully pass the licensure examinations, and had useful coping skills to cope with the stresses of completing the tests (Norris, 2013). Test taking strategies, such as those suggested by Wall (2008) helped to reduce the amount of anxiety the participants experienced. In learning about elimination or solving techniques in classes or tutoring sessions, the participants successfully overcame the feelings of anxiety experienced while completing the licensure examination. Thus, programs should commit to sharing test-taking strategies with students.

Classroom environment also emerged as an important aspect of participants' experiences. Several participants mentioned they experienced a negative classroom environment during enrollment in the preparation program. For example, some said they felt they could not openly communicate with the professor and their peers. Previous research has shown that individuals who perceive their environment to be highly evaluative while testing have lower test scores (Hancock, 2001). Within this study, participants who perceived their classroom environment to be a highly evaluative experienced lower well-being. It is suggested that faculty members should work to create a community of learners, and a classroom environment for students to openly discuss their thoughts with the class. Those classes that worked to actively engage and respect student opinions within their courses positively contributed to the learning and well-being of the participants within this study.

Two limitations of this research study must be noted. First, due to the exploratory nature of this study and convenience sampling strategy used, these results cannot be generalized to all

teacher preparation programs. Second, while participants certainly provided valuable data about their experiences, the qualitative data that was collected cannot be statistically analyzed or interpreted. In a climate of evidence-based program development, it must be acknowledged that some might believe that quantitative analyses may hold more weight in making recommendations.

Two additional findings are noteworthy. First, it was concerning to learn how many participants experienced financial concerns relating to the licensure examinations. Future research might focus on the financial resources and accommodations that are offered to teacher licensure candidates and whether they even come close to stated need. Second, participants who completed semesters that contained more education courses than pre-requisite courses experienced higher well-being than in those semesters when they were enrolled in pre-requisite and double-major courses. The course load negatively contributed to the well-being ratings of some participants as well, which was an unexpected finding. Future research should work to evaluate and explore the course load that students must complete within a preparation program. The evaluation of the course load may lead to a reconfiguration of course offerings, helping to improve student well-being within the preparation program.

Conclusion

To further improve the well-being ratings of students while they are enrolled within the teacher preparation program, it is recommended that more explicit instructions about the MTEL tests, dates, and procedures should be shared with students enrolled in the program. Explicit instruction about deadlines and testing information can be shared with students via email communication, as well as an information sheet that can be accessed within the School of Education office. Faculty members within the program should also be provided with clear and

consistent information about testing procedures, testing format, and the deadlines that must be completed (Gulek, 2003). In informing both the students and the faculty members within the program, student questions about the examinations will be efficiently and easily answered, increasing student well-being throughout enrollment, specifically during the times of MTEL testing. The tutoring that students enroll in should also offer instruction in test taking. Offering strategic testing support in classes, during conversations between faculty and students, and in tutoring sessions will help to decrease testing anxiety that students experience when completing MTEL examinations (Wall, Johnson, & Seymonds, 2012).

The next recommendation would be for faculty members, who are instructing courses that have similar content that will be assessed during the MTEL examinations, to embed test questions and test taking strategies in the content of lectures and PowerPoints throughout the duration of the semester (Miyasaka, 2000). When considering that most of the participants experienced testing anxiety, embedding examination samples and questions could better prepare students, reducing the amount of anxiety that students experience while testing. Workshops should also offer students lessons in elimination, solving, and substitution strategies, which would help to reduce testing anxiety, while also helping to increase licensure examination scores (Wall, 2008). It is important to note, though, that these recommendations are not suggesting that faculty “teach to the test.” Of course, faculty members must focus first on the content their specific courses are expected to provide to the students within their classes.

The last recommendation would be for the School of Education, or for the university to offer workshops for faculty members, with a focus on how to improve the classroom environment. The classroom environment positively or negatively contributes to the well-being of students, especially when it is perceived to as a highly evaluative learning environment

(Hancock, 2001). The workshops could focus on how to improve and sustain a sense of community within the classroom.

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Table 1

 Attributions for Positive vs. Negative Emotions/Well-Being

<u>Attribution</u>	<u>Participant IDs</u>
<u>Positive</u>	
Enrollment in only Education courses	001, 005, 007, 009, 010
Faculty helping with preparation	003, 004, 006
No MTEL scheduled	003, 006
News of passing MTEL	010
Perceived emotional support	004, 005, 009
<u>Negative</u>	
Anxiety during MTEL testing	001, 002, 003, 004, 005, 007, 009, 010
Worry about/feeling unprepared for MTEL	001, 003, 005
Negative classroom environment	004, 005, 006, 007, 008
Course load high	002, 003
Personal/family problems	001, 005, 007