A Qualitative Assessment of Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of the At-Risk Student

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A QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF PRESERVICE TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE AT-RISK STUDENT

by

ANDREA QUINTERO

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors in the Major Program in Elementary Education in the College of Education and Human Performance and in The Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify preservice teachers’ perceptions of the at-risk student and their perceptions toward their educational preparation to effectively teach the at-risk student. A ten-question survey was conducted to gain insight on 15 preservice teachers’ perceptions of the at-risk student. The results showed that 100% of the preservice teachers believe at-risk students could learn, but then were dissatisfied with the training that the teacher preparation program at the university has provided them. These findings suggest the importance of conducting further research on preservice teachers’ preparation programs. Preservice teachers’ ability to effectively teach the at-risk student can have a lasting impact on these students and their success in the future.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my committee for your support: Dr. Everett, Dr. Ortiz, my committee chair Dr. Gresham. This would not have been possible without you. I am forever grateful for this opportunity.
Dedication

This is for you, Mom, Dad, Claudia, Alex, and Richard.
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Chapter One: Introduction

According to Roselle and Liner (2013), teacher preparation programs are constantly challenged to provide preservice teachers the experiences to help them fully understand the demands of being a teacher. This challenge also includes the presentation and delivery of effective teaching practices to meet the needs of all learners including those identified as at-risk. Some, but not all courses, in teacher preparation programs offer in-school observations and participation within a variety of grade levels with the ultimate goal of creating better teachers (Bacon, 1992). However, the question remains whether teacher preparation programs provide preservice teachers enough opportunities for interaction with at-risk students. It is critical that all preservice teachers understand and recognize the cognitive and emotional nature of the students they will be teaching, particularly the at-risk student (Ford & Quinn, 2010).

Relevance of the Study

According to the National Center of Educational Statistics (2016), White students enrolled in public schools are projected to decrease. The enrollment of Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander students will increase between the fall of 2014 and fall of 2025. The National Center of Educational Statistics documented an increase in racial minority categories around the country. However, the diversity among preservice teachers is not increasing (Ford & Quinn, 2010) The National Center of Educational Statistics (2010), stated that 90% of public school teachers are middle-aged, Caucasian females. Research by Cox (2012) posited concerns with the dominant class teachers’ expectations particularly as it relates to minority, low socioeconomic students (identified as the at-risk student) in relation to impact on achievement.
At-risk students are not held to higher expectations; therefore, their achievement levels are lower (Cox, 2012).

Some researchers believe that the roots of at-risk behavior begin in the elementary grades with low achievement patterns, high absenteeism, and low self-esteem (Donnelly, 1987). At-risk students tend to exhibit behavior problems, are nonparticipatory in school activities, and have a minimal identification within the school culture (Ford & Quinn, 2010). Consequently, a particularly difficult problem education programs face is preparing teachers who are able to work with students who are educationally disadvantaged, and/or at-risk academically and emotionally (Castro, 2010). Education programs that specifically identify and work with at-risk students are needed at every grade level (McDonald, 2002). This includes preservice teachers who are well informed and alert to the at-risk symptoms and identifiers. However, research has indicated that preservice teachers have very limited contact with at-risk students in a classroom setting prior to becoming inservice teachers (Bacon, 1992).

Twenty years ago, (Bacon, 1992) found that many preservice teachers believed that at-risk students differ from conventional students as learners, and as people. The expectations of educators impact their academic success; teacher expectations have an important impact on student achievement. Preservice teachers believe that their role as a teacher is to convey information to students, while only expressing minimal regard for how these students live outside of their classroom (McDonald, 2002). According to Ford and Quinn (2010), this could be due to preservice teachers’ lack of experience and understanding effectively to teach the at-risk student. The assumption is that because they do not want to teach in a “high-risk”
environment, such as a Title I school, that they do not need to know such information (Liggett, 2011). As a preservice teacher, I have often wondered if my peers experience the same feeling of doubt or lack of vision regarding how to effectively teach at-risk students. I have experienced reservations of my own abilities and qualifications to come face to face with students who heavily require additional support both academically and emotionally. I personally believe preservice teachers do not have enough experience working with at-risk students. Therefore, I decided to pursue my curiosities and research preservice teachers’ perceptions of at-risk students.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions will be posed:

(1) What are preservice teachers’ perceptions of the at-risk students?

(2) What are preservice teachers’ perceptions toward their educational preparation to effectively teach the at-risk student?

Chapter Two will discuss the literature review and previous research. The subjects to be discussed are identification and definition of the at-risk student, academic and behavioral expectations, preservice teachers’ beliefs, and service learning. Chapter Three will discuss the methodology of this study, including information about the target population, development of survey questions, and survey distribution. Chapter Four will provide the survey results in depth for each question. Finally, Chapter Five will discuss the conclusion, and recommendations for further research.
Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Introduction

“We can’t teach what we don’t know” (Howard, 1999, p. 9). This statement applies to knowledge of our subject matter and student populations, as well as to the knowledge of working with the at-risk student. According to McDonald (2012), too many educators are inadequately prepared to work with students who require the most help. He indicated that teachers lack the skills to effectively implement multiple instructional strategies to reach those identified as at-risk, which also affects student’s inability to reach their full potential. However, exactly “who is at-risk” and “what are they at-risk of”? This study will focus upon determining preservice teachers’ perceptions of preparedness to teach the at-risk student. Therefore, it is essential to review the available literature in order to define at-risk students as well as to determine what practices have proved most effective in working with at-risk students (McDonald, 2002).

Preservice teachers seem to be ill prepared to effectively work with at-risk students (Krummel, 2013). Teacher preparation programs have the objective to educate preservice teachers in a way that seems applicable to real life (Liggett, 2011). “Preservice teachers’ vision may be at its most formative and vulnerable state during their teacher preparation program and can have a powerful impact on what they think is possible for themselves and their students. Constructing opportunities that assist preservice teachers in creating a flexible, yet informed vision is essential for creating the next generation of resilient teachers” (Roselle & Liner, 2013, p. 51).
Many preservice teachers who enter the classroom for service learning tell stories about their negative experiences with at-risk students and their frustration about their (lack-of) abilities and qualifications to effectively reach the at-risk student (Ford & Quinn, 2010). Elementary classrooms around the United States are becoming more diverse (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010) with increasing numbers of identified at-risk students. It is projected that by 2020, 50% percent of the student population in the United States will consist of students of color. Meanwhile, there is no projected increase in teachers of color (Gollick & Chinn, 2009). Elementary preservice teachers need to understand how to work with students who are at-risk, but so far, they do not appear to be prepared to teach such students effectively (Krummel, 2013).

It is important for preservice teachers to engage in meaningful interaction with at-risk student populations (Garza, 2012). In doing so, preservice teachers have the opportunity to gain an understanding of the cultural differences and commonalities between themselves and other students in terms of how these students view the world, how their lives are lived, and how their families are disciplined and organized. Having this knowledge of others can lead to healthy relationships, student satisfaction, and positive learning climates for both teachers and students (Gibson, 2004).

Identification and Characteristics of the “At-Risk” Student

Academic Failure

An at-risk student is any student who has difficulty keeping up with classmates. At-risk students are students who are not experiencing success in schools and are at a high risk for being
potential dropouts. They are typically low academic achievers who exhibit low self-esteem. Generally, they are from low socioeconomic status families (Donnelly, 1987). At-risk students regularly fall between the cracks of the educational system unless they are provided with the assistance they need (Robins, 2013). Poor academic performance is a clear indication of “at-riskness” (Guerin & Denti, 1999, p.76). Academic failure increases the likelihood that a student will be labeled at-risk. Most of these students do drop out of school once they reach the legal age limit to do so (McDonald, 2002). Grade retention is a prime indicator of academic failure. As stated by Slavin and Madden (1989), grade retention is among the “least effective” strategies for dealing with at-risk students. “Failing more students does have a misleading short-term effect on test percentiles or normal curve equivalents because the students are a year older when they take the tests. However the long-term effects on student achievement are most often negative” (Slavin & Madden, 1989, p. 4).

Disengagement

At-risk students display disengagement from school, are underachievers, unmotivated, socially isolated, and/or otherwise unhappy in the traditional school environment (Husted & Cavalluzzo, 2001). A student’s engagement in school is demonstrated across three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. A student is engaged when they participate in academic as well as social and extra curricular activities at school. Students are also engaged when they feel included and have a feeling of belonging to the school, as well as when they are personally invested in and take ownership of their learning. Disengagement refers to a situation where a child demonstrates none of these characteristics given. When a child shows some of these characteristics, it may be an indication that the child is at risk of disengagement, and therefore,
potentially of being labeled at-risk (Victoria State Government, 2015).

**Behavioral Expectations**

Depending on their varying ability levels, Studies have confirmed that teachers’ expectations of students affect student performance. The following research shows that teacher expectations have an influence on student and teacher behavior. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be aware of the interrelationships between expectation and behavior. High teacher expectations result in higher student performance, while the low teacher expectations produce low preforming students (Castro, 1991). Students are aware of the different behaviors teachers display towards high and low achieving students (Brattesani, Weinstern, & Marshall, 1984). Since one characteristic of an at-risk student is low achievement in school, teachers need to be aware of the potential problems his or her instructional behaviors can cause (Castro, 1991). It is important for teachers to have expectations of their students. Setting expectations allows teachers to set realistic academic goals as well as to provide individualized instruction (Patriarca & Kragt, 1986). Teachers form expectations of their students from their perceptions of the students’ siblings, from permanent records, test scores, other teachers, previous ability grouping, as well as social class. Teacher perceptions may result in inaccurate expectations (Arganbright, 1983). In addition, teachers tend to overestimate the achievement of high ability students and underestimate the achievement of low ability students (Castro, 1991). While it is beneficial for at-risk students to be identified so they can receive the additional support, such identification and perceptions may result in a student being inappropriately labeled. This label can affect the way at-risk students are treated by their teachers thus influencing teacher expectations (Koehler, 1988). Teachers and at-risk students often become stuck in a vicious cycle. The at-risk student
who typically perceives school as boring, threatening, non-productive and a waste of time is likely to behave as a reflection of those feelings and preform at a low level. In turn, this causes the teacher to see the student as lacking drive, energy, and ambition. When efforts to motivate the student fail, it reinforces the teacher’s negative perception of the at-risk student, and reinforces the students’ original perception of themselves. Ultimately affecting the students’ self image and motivation (Eschenmann, 1988).

Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs in regard To Diversity

White, middle aged, Christian females who have little knowledge regarding diversity make up the majority of preservice teachers in the United States (Krummel, 2013). A study conducted by Silverman (2010) found that “preservice teachers do not feel personally responsible for multiculturalism and diversity to the extent that they feel teachers in general or the school and community are responsible (p. 321).” Teacher education programs have the responsibility to effectively educate preservice teachers. This includes building an understanding within them of their responsibility to acceptance of diversity within a classroom environment. This is especially important because researchers have found that preservice teachers feel uncomfortable addressing the idea of diversity in the classroom (Krummel, 2013). Researchers in this area have many different definitions for diversity.

According to the National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2010; 2012), “diversity” is defined as “the differences among groups of people and individuals based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, language, exceptionalities, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic region in which they live.” Because of the discomfort this
topic brings, preservice teachers face anxiety working with students that come from different backgrounds and upbringings other than her/his own (Ford & Quinn, 2010). “By producing teachers who have some understanding and some willingness to work with students who have substantial problems in school, teacher-educators may create a work force better able to successfully deal with the realities of teaching at-risk and disadvantaged students” (Bacon, 1992, p. 11). It is necessary that preservice teachers enter the profession reasonably prepared to help all students in their care to develop and grow as human beings. Helping a preservice teacher develop appreciation for, and empathy with, those students who have school experiences that are very different from their own would be exceptionally useful (Bacon, 1992).

Service Learning

Instructional Strategies and the At-Risk Student

Many school factors affect the success of at-risk students such as the school’s atmosphere, the overall attitude toward diversity, their involvement in the community, and a culturally responsive curriculum, just to name a few. Out of all of these factors, the personal and academic relationships between teachers and their students may be the most influential. Certain behaviors and instructional strategies enable teachers to build a stronger teacher/student relationship with their at-risk students. Effective teachers of at-risk students acknowledge both individual and cultural differences enthusiastically and identify the differences in a positive manner. Positive identification builds a basis for the development of effective communication and instructional strategies (Burnette, 1999). Constructivist techniques seem to be effective strategies for at-risk children (McDonald, 2002). These include peer tutoring, cooperative grouping, service learning, answering questions with questions, and a strong focus on student
interests are constructivist strategies that have proven to be effective (Karlson, 1996). Successful programs often separate at-risk students from other students, have low student-to-teacher ratios, and provide counseling and supportive services. Most successful programs tailor the curriculum to the learning needs of each student. Effective programs involve a broad range of special services to help at-risk students improve their low self-esteem while providing a supportive system. These include remediation programs, tutoring, childcare services, medical care, substance abuse awareness programs, bilingual instruction, employment training, and close follow-up procedures on truancy and absenteeism. These programs are service intensive and provide the student the benefit of one-on-one contact with qualified staff (Donnelly, 1987).

Chapter Three discusses the methodology used in this study and identifies the target population. Then, the development of survey questions is discussed.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The methodology chapter discusses the logistics of this study. This section specifically goes into depth discussing the target population of the study and why the target population was chosen. Additionally, the process of developing the survey questions is explained. This information includes the organization of the survey as well. Survey distribution methods are also be discussed along with the gathering of survey results final analysis. The purpose of this study was to determine preservice teachers’ perceptions of teaching the “at-risk” student. This study has also developed an understanding of preservice teachers’ perceptions toward their educational preparation to teach effectively the at-risk student. In order to determine preservice teachers’ perceptions a survey (see Appendix B) was developed. The preservice teacher survey was adapted in part from a doctoral thesis by Brown (2009) about preservice teachers’ attitudes toward their preparedness to teach culturally diverse student populations. The first half of the survey identified teachers’ perceptions of the at-risk student. The second half of the survey identified preservice teachers’ perceptions toward their educational preparation to effectively teach the at-risk student. Identifiable information was used to interpret the results concerning preservice teachers’ perceptions on the at-risk student.

A total of 15 preservice teachers from a large southeastern university participated in the study. The undergraduate students were mainly female (13 out of 15) therefore; no results were interpreted using gender. All preservice teachers involved were enrolled in the College of Education and pursuing a K-6 endorsement/certification in elementary education. In addition, all 15 preservice teachers were enrolled in Internship I, which is a required set of field-experience hours at local public schools. While the preservice teachers were enrolled in Internship I, they
were also enrolled in mathematics and reading courses. These methods courses prepared preservice teachers who applied during the preservice teachers’ classroom experiences, which involved two full days weekly. The participants in this study were completing their Internship I in different counties throughout central Florida. Throughout Internship I, preservice teachers were fully immersed in a classroom-based teaching experience in a K-6 setting two days a week, side by side with an inservice teacher. The candidates were within one or two semesters of graduating and becoming inservice teachers. Of the of the 15, two candidates had minors, one in legal studies and the other in hospitality. Based on the research questions and the flexibility to meet with the preservice teachers, an in-person interview would be the most accurate and efficient way to obtain the data. The survey was administered throughout a two-month period, to explore the perceptions of preservice teachers toward the at-risk student. All participants were informed both verbally and in writing that their participation in the study was completely voluntary. IRB approval was obtained to complete the study (See Appendix A).

Research Design

A qualitative research design with a survey was the chosen method used in this study. The survey included a questionnaire that was read aloud by the researcher as the preservice teachers answered each question in order. The researcher recorded preservice teachers responses and later transcribed the audiotape. The survey was selected because it was appropriate to address the research questions in this study. Participants’ responses were kept confidential.

Instrument
The two research questions this study sought to investigate include: 1) What are preservice teachers’ perceptions of the at risk student; 2) What are preservice teachers’ perceptions toward their educational preparation to effectively teach the at-risk student. The ten-question survey (See Appendix B) is adapted in part from a doctorate thesis study (Brown, 2009). Survey questions were developed specifically to give a clear picture of preservice teachers’ perceptions of the at risk student, what they know about the at-risk student, how they feel about educating the at-risk student, and what strategies would be most beneficial for the at-risk student. These questions offered preservice teachers a voice to illustrate their perceptions of how teacher preparation programs at a large southeastern university have prepared them to effectively teach at-risk students.

Looking forward, chapter Four provides the results of the ten-question survey.
Chapter Four: Survey Results

This chapter is intended to analyze the results of the preservice teacher survey (Brown, 2009). There were ten questions developed to analyze the preservice teachers’ perceptions of at-risk students. This chapter will review the responses to each question. The total number of preservice teachers who responded to the survey was 15. Since the number of respondents was small, it was decided to analyze the results in an in-depth manner, breaking apart each question and response, rather than viewing each question individually. To compare survey responses confidentially, each preservice teacher has been labeled with a letter ranging from A-O.

Question One Results

Preservice teachers were asked to define the at-risk student. Preservice teachers’ responses to this definition included the following: “low income family”, from a “low-income area”, a “disadvantaged student, or a student living in “poverty.” Some preservice teachers’ defined at-risk students as students who were “failing” or who had “family issues” or whose families are not engaged or “involved with the child, school, or their education.” For instance, Teacher D reported that an at-risk student is a “student that lacks family support, not involved in the school place, and has social and emotional disorders”. Other preservice teachers’ defined at-risk students as those who have a disability or function below grade level. For example, Teacher G reported that an at-risk student “could also be a student with ADD, or another disability that is holding them back from preforming at school.” The responses varied when looking at them overall, but not when looking at each response individually. Figure 1 illustrates the various preservice teacher responses in identifying the at-risk student.
**Figure 1. Preservice teachers’ definition of the at-risk student**

*Totals equal to more than 15 because some respondents used more than one key word.*

**Question Two Results:**

Most preservice teachers reported that the knowledge of their definition of an at-risk student came from their experiences within their service learning and/or Internship I (See Figure 2). Teacher N reported that she had never heard the word “at-risk” within the teacher education program, but had heard it in her service learning experience. Another less common answer was through the coursework at the university. Some preservice teachers reported being able to figure
out their meaning by the context of the word at-risk, However, many felt it was not a positive labeling. For example, Teacher L reported not having any formal instruction on at-risk students.
Figure 2. How preservice teachers determined their definition of the at-risk student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How did you determine this definition?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assumed the definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside classrooms/internship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors (lecture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursework (class materials)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Totals equal to more than 15 because some respondents used more than 1 key word.

**Question Three Results**

Out of the 15 preservice teachers surveyed, 15 believe that all at-risk children can learn. Teacher D mentioned that “it takes the right style of teaching and it takes a teacher to really make a connection and get through to the child.” No further elaboration was provided as to what the “right style” of teaching meant and a follow up question was not asked. Teacher F stated “Yes, absolutely. I think it depends on the motivation that they get and their motivation to learn. As teachers we have to get them interested and engaged and get [the students] mind off of things they are doing off at home.” Teacher O reported, “Yes, everyone can learn. Maybe at a different pace, but learning is always being done.” Teacher K stated, “Yes, if they are put with the right modifications and support they can learn.” No further elaboration was provided as to what
modifications and support this preservice teacher intended in her response and a follow up question was not asked. Teacher L said, “Yes, I do believe they can learn, not exactly to the standards, but I do believe they can.”

**Question Four Results**

Teachers A, B, C, E, K, M, and N reported feeling “unsure” of being adequately prepared to effectively teach the at-risk learner. Teachers D, G, L, and O reported not feeling adequately prepared to teach the at-risk learner. Teacher L stated that she did not feel she had enough knowledge on the Multiple Tiered Support System (MTSS) process or information regarding how to teach students within a tiered framework. Teachers F, H, I, and J reported feeling adequately prepared to teach the at-risk student. Teacher H stated that she is prepared “…only because we’ve had so many hours that we’ve devoted to learning about at-risk [students] in and out of our university. We’ve been in the classroom, we’ve experienced the students and you know, spoke with teachers and worked alongside [supervising] teachers. I feel like majority of the classes we’ve taken have been to help students who are at-risk. So, yeah I feel that I’m prepared...”

**Question Five Results**

Out of the 15 preservice teachers surveyed, eight stated that their teacher preparation program has made them more aware of the need for identifying the at-risk student in education (See Figure 3). A total of five teachers stated no, that they do not have more awareness of the need for identifying the at-risk student in education. For example, Teacher D stated, “I don’t think so, to be honest. I feel like I have become aware of it by seeing it in the classroom and
speaking to my teachers in the elementary schools. I don’t think enough time was spent in my classes in school (university setting)…” A total of two teachers stated that they did feel prepared to identify the at-risk student and attributed their readiness to their Internship. Teacher G stated that “…my Internship is what has prepared me more and I feel like the [supervising] teacher in the classroom showed me things and explained things to me… I feel like the Internship helped me more, 100%.”
Question Six Results

Preservice teachers were asked, “Do you feel your teacher preparation program has given you the knowledge to be able to locate and evaluate at-risk students within your classroom?” Of the total, nine preservice teachers stated, “yes.” Teacher A stated, “Yes, I think so, [our professors] have given us a lot of information and resources.” On the other hand, four preservice teachers felt like their teacher preparation program had not given them the knowledge to locate and evaluate at-risk students within the classroom. Teacher D responded, “No, I feel like I would need more time to work with them before I can determine that. I don’t think that walking into the classroom, I have that prior knowledge or confidence in myself…” and, two preservice teachers stated that they were felt they both prepared and not prepared. Teacher G,
said “for the most part, yeah. I kind of know what I should be looking for…” (see Figure 4 for preservice teacher responses).

*Figure 4. Teacher preparation responses*

The survey results showed that five preservice teachers used adapting curriculum to the student background is an effective technique/teaching strategy that can be used to effectively teach at-risk children whose backgrounds are different from their own (see Figure 5). A total of three preservice teachers stated that they could not identify any techniques/strategies to effectively teach at-risk students whose background is different from their own. Only one preservice teacher stated that they used relationship building with the student as a strategy to

*Question Seven Results*

The survey results showed that five preservice teachers used adapting curriculum to the student background is an effective technique/teaching strategy that can be used to effectively teach at-risk children whose backgrounds are different from their own (see Figure 5). A total of three preservice teachers stated that they could not identify any techniques/strategies to effectively teach at-risk students whose background is different from their own. Only one preservice teacher stated that they used relationship building with the student as a strategy to
teach effectively. Another preservice teacher stated that they used peer tutoring as a strategy to effectively teach at-risk students.
Question Eight Results

Preservice teachers were asked, “Do you feel that when you begin your first year of teaching, you will be sufficiently prepared to meet the educational needs of “at-risk” students? Why/Why not?” A total of five preservice teachers stated yes. Teacher I stated, “Yes, I feel like the program [at the university] has hit all the topics that I need to know…”. Unfortunately, four preservice teachers reported that they were not sufficiently prepared to meet the educational needs of the at-risk student during their first year of teaching. Teacher M reported, “No, I’m going to have to rely on my teammates.” Teacher N stated, “No, I’m going to be asking a lot of
questions to the reading coaches and math coaches because they specialize in the field. I’m more prepared for the average student.” While three preservice teachers stated that they hoped to be sufficiently prepared, while two preservice teachers did not know whether they would be prepared on their first year or not. Teacher O reported that their level of preparedness to meeting the educational needs of at-risk students on their first year teaching depended on the student. “…I can’t say I will be prepared to meet the needs of every at-risk student, but I may be able to meet the needs of certain at-risk students. Every student is different and needs a different approach to education.”

**Question Nine Results**

When asked, *“Do you feel that working with “at-risk” students makes your job more rewarding or stressful? Why/Why not?”* Interestingly, 15 out of 15 preservice teachers stated that they felt it was both rewarding and stressful (see Figure 6). Furthermore, in their responses they said that that working with at-risk students was first stressful and then rewarding. Teacher B identified at-risk students as Title I and for this question responded that they “would prefer to work at a Title I school because it is more rewarding.” Teacher A reported, “It’s both. It can be stressful trying to figure out what works best for [the at-risk student] to help [the at-risk student] learn and grow. It can also be rewarding because if the student does become successful and is growing by what you’re implementing and strategies you’re using, that can be rewarding…” Teacher F stated, “I would say both actually. Definitely more rewarding because you get to see more growth, I would think. But then it’s also stressful because you don’t know where [at-risk students] are going home to every day. Some of them do struggle academically as well, so I would say it is [rewarding and stressful]”. Teacher H stated, “
I feel like being able to teach students in general is really rewarding. I feel there might be stress in certain situations. It may be stressful to try to teach somebody that isn’t grasping the information the same way or understanding everything because they may have a barrier of learning, that you can’t really easily teach them. I think in all it will be rewarding. At the end of the year, even if it’s just a little progress, it is still progress and I feel like that’s a reward.”

Teacher J reported, “Both, I think it’s more stressful and that’s what makes it more rewarding at the end.” Teacher K said,

“Yeah, I know that I will have support from other staff; it’s just knowing when to go to them and the appropriate way to ask them. Yes, I do feel like I’m prepared if my whole class is at-risk, but I’m not sure I’m prepared to differentiate instruction if there are different levels [within one class].”
Figure 6. Preservice teachers’ responses on jobs rewards and stress

Do you feel that working with “at-risk” students makes your job more rewarding or stressful? Why/Why not?

*Totals equal to more than 15 because some respondents used more than one key word.

Question Ten Results

A total of ten preservice teachers reported that they would like to receive more professional development training working with at-risk students (see Figure 7). Of the total, only three preservice teachers stated that it would be good to have additional training and were specific about their response. For instance, Teacher A stated that she thought it
“Would be good to have more training because I haven’t had too much experience with at-risk students. I think actually working with students who are at-risk and having [the professional development training] actually guide me with [the students] using different strategies and ways you can implement things in the classroom would be really helpful.”

Teacher C also gave a definite example. He stated “Yes, I would also like to know more about the communities the at-risk students are in, so I can reach the family and the whole community.” Teacher E reported,

“Yes, whether they are professional development sessions at the school I’m teaching at, or virtual. [Professional development] workshops on tactile measures that you can use to help [at-risk student], especially with lower elementary kids. I don’t want really a whole lot of reading material. I’m very visual, so I want to see it. A video or webinar is something I would prefer.”

However, two preservice teachers were not definitive on whether they would have liked to have professional development training after graduation. For example, Teacher F stated, “Yeah, I guess so. I don’t really know what’s out there, but I think it would be beneficial, for sure.” Teacher I stated, “I wouldn’t mind it. I don’t think more professional development would hurt. Some hands on training, or watch videos of scenarios.”
Figure 7. Preservice teachers’ perception of training

The following chapter will provide a conclusion. Limitations as well as implications will also be discussed.
Chapter Five: Conclusion

Chapter five concludes this study. Responses from the survey, previously reported and charted, were analyzed in combination with the findings of the literature review in Chapter two to form a conclusion. This, in turn, addressed the research questions posed in Chapter one. Any study limitations are also identified and discussed. This chapter will also include how the limitations influenced the results of the preservice teacher interviews. The chapter includes final recommendations and educational implications, which serves the purpose of furthering research on preservice teachers’ perceptions of the at-risk student.

The purpose of this research was to identify preservice teachers’ perceptions of the at-risk student. Each preservice teacher was pursuing a K-6 grade endorsement/certification at a large southeastern university. A survey adapted from Brown’s (2009) dissertation was conducted to gain insight on these perspectives. The survey asked preservice teachers their definition of the at-risk student. A total of six preservice teachers believed that at-risk students are identified as being “low income” students. A total of four preservice teachers identified at-risk students were “failing”. Also, four others identified at-risk as those who have “family issues” and three preservice teachers identified them as “below grade level” or having “disabilities”. A total of two preservice teachers indicted that at-risk students were only those from “Title I” schools. And finally, One preservice identified an at-risk student as one who has “social/emotional issues”, were at-risk of “dropping out”, and were “struggling” learners. Donnelly (1987) identified at-risk students as students who have difficulties keeping up with other students, are not experiencing success in school, and are potential dropouts. Ford and Quinn (2010) determined that at-risk students tend to exhibit behavior problems, are non participatory in school activities, and have a
minimal identification within the school culture. While research has identified the definition of at-risk the responses for preservice teachers were very diverse in their identification of the at-risk student.

Preservice teachers were also asked if they believe that all at-risk children can learn. Out of the 15 preservice teachers surveyed, 15 believed that at-risk children could learn. A total of eight out of 15 preservice teachers stated that their teacher preparation program has made them more aware of the need for identifying the at-risk student. However, seven out of 15 preservice teachers reported feeling “unsure” of being adequately prepared to teach the at-risk student. Four preservice teachers reported not feeling adequately prepared to teach the at-risk student. While only four out of 15 preservice teachers reported feeling adequately prepared to teach the at-risk student. This shows that the majority of preservice teachers surveyed did not feel adequately prepared, or felt “unsure” about their preparedness. If preservice teachers do not feel adequately prepared to teach the at-risk student, they may not set high expectations for at-risk students.

According to Bacon (1991), high teacher expectations result in higher student performance, while the low teacher expectations produce low preforming students.

A total of nine preservice teachers reported that their teacher preparation program had given them the knowledge to be able to locate and evaluate the at-risk students within the classroom. Only four preservice teachers said that it had not given them the knowledge and two preservice teachers were unsure. Karlson (1996) reported that effective strategies to teach at-risk students include peer tutoring, cooperative grouping, service learning, answering questions with questions, and a strong focus on student interests. These are constructivist strategies that have proven to be effective. When the preservice teachers were asked to give strategies on how to
effectively teach the at-risk student, three preservice teachers said that they did not know any strategies. Only one preservice teacher reported peer tutoring as an effective strategy. Another preservice teacher stated that she used relationship building with students as an effective teaching strategy. Both were strategies identified as successful constructivist techniques in the literature (Burnette, 1999; McDonald, 2002). Some preservice teachers indicated that their teacher preparation program did give them the knowledge to locate and evaluate students. However no preservice teachers were able to provide those proven strategies that work best with at-risk students.

It is crucial for teacher preparation programs to identify the definition of at-risk students, so that preservice teachers are able to accurately identify an at-risk student and effectively teach the at-risk student according to their individual needs. Preservice teachers could be educated the definition of the at-risk student by their participation in seminars, aligned student preparation programs, online modules, and/or textbooks regarding at-risk students. From my own experiences in the elementary education program, I do not feel that my education courses have adequately prepared me to effectively teach the at-risk student, thus my desire for this research. It is clear from preservice teachers’ responses that they too do not feel they have been adequately prepared. Prior to this research, I too, was unsure of the identification of an at-risk student. I had some understanding that an at-risk student was a struggling student. However, due to my lack of knowledge on the identification of the at-risk student, my confidence lagged similar to those I surveyed. The knowledge I gained from the study of preservice teachers’ perceptions of the at-risk learner was invaluable. It is my hope that the results of this research will be disseminated throughout teacher education programs to stress the importance of identifying an at-risk student
and identify the effective practices to teach the at-risk student within each course. Prior to beginning this study, I wondered whether the preservice teachers in my program were as concerned as I was about our preparedness to teach the at-risk students in the classroom.

From this study, we are reminded that the preservice teachers’ voices should be invited for feedback because they have an effect on our program. The ability to effectively teach at-risk students shifts back to the preparedness of preservice teachers and their ability to teach. The goal is for preservice teachers to have the working knowledge and confidence to teach all students, including those identified as at-risk. As the results indicated, each preservice teacher thought at-risk students could learn, but were dissatisfied with the training that the university has provided them. Therefore, the results from this study provide insight on the teacher education programs and how they might influence the effectiveness of teaching the at-risk student.

**Limitations**

There are limitations that exist in this study. Preservice teachers gave varied responses when asked to provide a definition of the “at-risk” student. Therefore, it would benefit this research to ensure that the working definition was clear and consistent. During the interview process, no follow up questions were asked when needed. For example, while responding to Question Three Teacher D stated that at-risk students can learn, but it takes the “right style of teaching” in order to reach the at-risk student. No further elaboration was provided and none was asked of the preservice teacher to clarify what the “right style of teaching” meant. Teacher K responded to Question Three that she believed at-risk students could learn if given the right modifications and support. Again, no follow up question was asked to determine the right
modifications and support. The sample size was also a limitation to this study. Because of the timing of the interviews, which took place during the summer semester, many preservice teachers were not available to participate in the study. Therefore, this study may not be representative of most of the preservice teachers at this large southeastern university, but rather it captures the voice of only a few of our future educators.

Implications

Although all preservice teachers perceived at-risk students as a population that could learn, their definition of an “at-risk student” was very diverse across preservice teachers, but not within each individual response. At-risk is an umbrella term embodying several student characteristics and therefore each definition should have been diverse. Therefore, training preservice teachers on the definition of “at-risk” as an umbrella term might be beneficial to effectively educating preservice teachers. This could ultimately influence their perceptions of the at-risk student. Furthermore, a possible implication of this study could be drawn from preservice teachers willingness to receive professional development once these preservice teachers move from Internship I to Internship II. All of the preservice teachers indicated that they would be willing to take part in additional training. Future studies might consider what strategies might be effective for professional development training for preservice teachers.

As a result of this study, I have learned a great deal about preservice teachers perceptions’ of the at-risk student, as well as preservice teachers’ perceptions toward their educational preparation to effectively teach the at-risk student.
References


Realizing the democratic ideal: A call for an integrative approach to inclusion of multicultural course content in teacher education programs. *Tep Volume 22-N4*, 464.


Appendix A: IRB Approval
Approval of Exempt Human Research

From:       UCF Institutional Review Board #1
            FWA0000351, IRB00001138

To:         Regina Harwood Gresham and Co-PI: Andrea Quintero

Date:       March 07, 2016

Dear Researcher:

On 03/07/2016, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:       Exempt Determination
Project Title:        A Qualitative Assessment of Preservice Teachers Perceptions of
the At-Risk Student
Investigator:         Regina Harwood Gresham
IRB Number:           SBE-16-12111
Funding Agency:       n/a
Grant Title:          n/a
Research ID:          n/a

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

[Signature]

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 03/07/2016 03:31:46 PM EST

IRB Manager
Appendix B: Interview Questions
A Qualitative Assessment of Preservice Teachers’ Perceptions of the At-Risk Student Survey

1) What is your definition of the “at-risk” elementary school student?

2) How did you determine this definition?

3) Do you believe that all “at-risk” children can learn?

4) Based on your definition of the “at-risk” student do you feel adequately prepared? How so? Or why not?

5) Do you feel your teacher preparation program has made you more aware of the need for identifying the “at-risk” student in education? Why/Why not?

6) Do you feel your teacher preparation program has given you the knowledge to be able to locate and evaluate “at-risk” students within your classroom?

7) What techniques/teaching strategies do you feel you have within your teacher tackle box to effectively teach “at-risk” children whose backgrounds differ from your own?

8) Do you feel that when you begin your first year of teaching, you will be sufficiently prepared to meet the educational needs of “at-risk” students? Why/Why not?

9) Do you feel that working with “at-risk” students makes your job more rewarding or stressful? Why/Why not?

10) When you graduate, would you like to receive more professional development training working with “at-risk” students? And if so, what training do you feel would be beneficial?


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1 Survey questions adapted in part from a doctorate thesis study (Brown, 2009)