

MIDDLE LEVEL PRESERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR OWN AND
STUDENTS' BACKGROUND DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

by

NICOLE LEIGH TORRENCE

(Under the Direction of P. Elizabeth Pate)

ABSTRACT

Teacher knowledge and teacher beliefs are combined to form the theoretical framework for this qualitative narrative inquiry study. The study examines the question, “How do preservice teachers’ perceptions of background differences and similarities evolve in the context (prior to and during) of a middle level teacher education program?” Preservice teachers’ stories indicate that perceptions of background differences and similarities (BDS) (e.g., language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns, familial support, familial structure, religion, gender, culture, home localities, students with disabilities, and students with varying abilities) evolve gradually over time and often in conjunction with external prompting. Primary data are derived from three individual semi-structured interviews and one focus group interview that was also conducted in a semi-structured format. Interviews were informal and conversational in tone. Additional data sources—a preprofessional experience packet, portfolio, and application materials—are archival in nature. Participants created Venn diagrams and metaphors for teaching while engaged in the study. Four middle level preservice teachers shared stories of experiences with BDS gained through school, work, volunteer activities, family, church, and everyday occurrences. The analysis illuminates the participants’ perceptions emerging in three levels, that

are awareness, acknowledgement, and action. Findings indicate that awareness occurred most often and action was rarely achieved. Characteristics of BDS, referenced most often by participants when talking about themselves, were familial structure and familial support. Socioeconomic status, ethnicity, familial support, and familial structure were the characteristics of BDS frequently discussed by participants as differences between themselves and students. Overall, participants indicated that if not directly encouraged to examine issues related to BDS, they did not consider them. Upon reflection, participants believe BDS to be a matter of utmost importance in their preservice teacher education and in their careers as teachers.

INDEX WORDS: Background difference and similarities, Preservice teacher education, Middle level education, Perceptions, Cross-cultural research, Language, Ethnicity, Socioeconomic status, Transience patterns, Familial support, Familial structure, Religion, Gender, Culture, Home localities, Students with disabilities, Students with varying abilities, Narrative inquiry, Diversity

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NICOLE LEIGH TORRENCE

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M.A.Ed., East Carolina University, 2001

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NICOLE LEIGH TORRENCE

Major Professor: P. Elizabeth Pate

Committee: P. Gayle Andrews
Shawn Glynn
Deborah J. Tippins

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2004

DEDICATION

I once heard it said that life is for journeys. This dissertation is dedicated to the special people who supported me on this journey, to date, the most ambitious journey of my life. Those special people are . . .

My Parents, Terry and Marilyn Torrence

My Sister and Her Children, Treva Smith and Seth and Sarah Rebert

My Brother, Ricky Torrence

My Parents-in-Law, Mark and Angie Thompson

and last, but certainly not least,

My husband, Aaron Thompson

Thank you for believing in me, encouraging me, helping me, and not letting me give up. I love all of you and will treasure each of you forever!

In Loving Memory of Mary Jane Matchapatow Fredenberg, my gram. 1924-2001.

Although my gram did not live to see me complete this journey,

her spirit remains with me – as do her love and support.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A world of difference exists in every middle level classroom, i.e., grades 4-8. Students in those classrooms are linguistically, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse (Au & Blake, 2003; Sleeter, 2001). In addition, students today come from a variety of familial structures, and many students have relocated since beginning their educational careers (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003). These students' teachers are not nearly as diverse as the students themselves. White, female, monolingual, middle class, and locally-raised are common descriptors of America's teachers (Hodgkinson, 2002; Sleeter, 2001; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992).

The background differences and similarities (i.e., language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, familial structure, and transience patterns) between students and teachers are expanding. The number of students who speak a language other than English at home is steadily rising. Today, 9.8 million or 20% of school-aged children, ages 5 to 17, speak a language other than English at home; 6.8 million of these students speak Spanish (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003). According to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (2002), over 400 languages are represented in schools. Currently, 20% of students have at least one foreign-born parent (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Approximately 38% of public school students are from an ethnic or racial minority group (Hodgkinson, 2002). By the year 2025, it has been predicted that the students of color will comprise approximately 50% of the school population (Dilworth & Brown, 2001; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001; Mercado, 2001). In addition, 20% of children under the age of 18 live in

poverty (Hodgkinson, 2002; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Nonetheless, the U. S. Department of Commerce (2001) reported that the median incomes for the majority of Americans (e.g., White, Black, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Hispanic) were the highest ever recorded.

Familial structures, or the type of family to which one belongs (e.g., two-parent, divorced) have experienced tremendous change in the past twenty years. In 1980, 78.5% of children lived in two-parent households, 19.4% of children lived in households maintained by their mother, and 2.2% of children lived in households maintained by their father (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2001). In 1998, 68% of children lived in a home with two parents, 23% of children lived in homes maintained by their mother, and 4% of children lived in homes maintained by their father (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2001). In addition, in 1998 approximately 3% of children lived with other family members and about 1% of children lived with non-family members (U. S. Department of Commerce, 2001).

Transience, the frequent relocation of individuals or families, is another factor greatly influencing education. Approximately 23% of students between the ages of 6 and 11 and 40% of students between the ages of 12 and 17 will have changed schools at least once in their academic career (U. S. Census Bureau, 2003). It is highly unlikely that the majority of students will start school and graduate from school within the same district.

As background differences among students have become varied, the characteristics of the majority of public school teachers have not. America's teachers are predominately White, female, monolingual, middle class, and locally raised (Hodgkinson, 2002; Sleeter, 2001; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). Preservice teachers often have more in common with each other than they do with their students (Johnson, 2002; Van Hook, 2002). Many of them come from rural or suburban communities and select their college or university based on its close proximity

to their homes (Terrill & Mark, 2000; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). Many teachers want to teach a student population similar to their own experiences as students (Au & Blake, 2003; Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2000; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992) because the limited interactions they have had previously with people who have backgrounds different from their own might cause discomfort (Dee & Henkin, 2002; Van Hook, 2002; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). One of the challenges many educators face today stems from identifying with students who have backgrounds different from their own.

Significance of the Study

Variations in the background differences of students challenges public school educators to acknowledge, accept, and celebrate the differences among students (Baruth & Manning, 1996; Dilworth & Brown, 2001). Beginning teachers often have reservations about and are reluctant to teach students with backgrounds different from their own (Dilworth & Brown, 2001). To educate all students well, teachers must have knowledge about the backgrounds of students and need to be aware of, appreciate, and respect the differences that students bring to the classroom (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Van Hook, 2002). Teachers must understand that each student is unique and important. When teachers recognize the value of student differences, the background characteristics of each student adds a variety of perspectives to the life of the classroom that can be capitalized on during instruction and in daily interactions. The National Middle School Association (NMSA), which focuses on improving schooling for middle grades students, views difference as a “vital, positive, and an enriching force in the continued development of society and especially in the educational processes of schools” (NMSA, n.d.a). Viewing the differences in background characteristics of students in a positive light and as educational tools only makes sense.

When the term “young adolescence” is used in the Middle Level Performance-Based Standards for Initial Middle Level Teacher Preparation from NMSA, it refers to students between the ages of 10 and 15 who are “of diverse ethnicity, race, language, religion, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, regional or geographic origin, and those with exceptional learning needs” (NMSA, n.d.b). When middle level preservice teachers are learning to teach all young adolescents, students from varied backgrounds are not exempt. Every student must be taught. However, young adolescents’ receptivity to teaching might depend on the relationship established with the teacher (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Preservice teachers ought to be sensitive to the social and emotional needs of all students. When teachers attempt to meet these needs, students may be more likely to engage academically. Preservice teachers may benefit from experiences that highlight and explore background differences and similarities so that they are ready to teach all students.

Preparation for teaching young adolescents from different backgrounds is essential in middle level teacher preparation programs. In addition to developing an understanding of all of the changes that young adolescents are experiencing (i.e., physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and moral) (Jackson & Davis, 2000), preservice teachers ought to learn how to address the unique characteristics of each student into the classroom activities. According to NMSA

Diversity is an element that is essential to all quality middle school teacher preparation programs. . . . Teachers should know about how developmental realities play themselves out against a backdrop of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, socioeconomic status, family, and community. (NMSA, n.d.a)

The backgrounds of the majority of preservice teachers will vary from the backgrounds of the students they teach (Johnson, 2002; Van Hook, 2002). Because each preservice teacher is

different and each middle grades student is different, gaining insight about how preservice teachers' perceptions of background difference evolve in the context of a middle level teacher preparation program ought to greatly enhance middle level teacher preparation programs.

According to Mercado (2001), teachers need to be knowledgeable about the lives of their students both inside and outside the classroom. Mercado asserted,

What teachers know about the lives of children outside of school affects their pedagogical practices. Inquiry needs to become a common pedagogical practice. In light of the diversity that is inherent in all classrooms, having the means to construct knowledge about differences among learners may be more important and less problematic than having information on learners in prepackaged forms. (p. 690)

Through inquiry about students' background differences and application of that knowledge, teachers should be able to cross the "cultural divide" (Zeichner, 2003, ¶ 8) that often exists in the classroom and reach all learners.

In most schooling situations, the teacher initiates and activates learning processes in students. What the teacher knows and does has a significant impact on what students learn (Mercado, 2001). Thus, a goal of teacher educators "must be to expand our students' range of vision" (Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992, p. 45). Teachers who are "consciously responsive to their students' cultural backgrounds" are in great demand (Dilworth & Brown, 2001, p. 659). Teachers need to create learning environments that are positive and accepting of all students.

Preservice teachers must be prepared to teach all students. However, "teacher education programs have historically educated preservice teachers to work effectively with one socioeconomic group, the middle class, and one culture, the mainstream or dominant culture" (Lord, 1997, p. 2). Perhaps this is because the "White, monolingual, English-speaking teacher

education professors and staff who are responsible for educating teachers for diversity often lack experience themselves in teaching in culturally diverse elementary and secondary schools . . .”

(Zeichner, 2003, ¶ 9). The disparity between the experiences of students and their educators emphasizes the need for educators to have knowledge of students and their background characteristics (Dee & Henkin, 2002; McFalls & Cobb-Roberts, 2001; Zeichner, 2003).

Regardless of the reasons for seemingly limited teacher preparation for students’ background differences and similarities, a strong and immediate need exists for teachers to be aware of their students’ backgrounds, to have intentions to address those backgrounds, and to use their knowledge of differences and similarities to reach all students in their teaching practices.

Teacher preparation programs ought to try to prepare preservice teachers to work with students from diverse and varied backgrounds, e.g., linguistic, ethnic, and social class (Au & Blake, 2003; Sleeter, 2001; Van Hook, 2002, Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Cochran-Smith (2001) argued that teacher education should prepare teachers who are critically and culturally responsive and potentially transformative. Increasing differences within the American school-aged population illuminate the need for teachers who are cognizant of and positively responsive to students’ backgrounds. Villegas and Lucas (2002) asserted “preparing teachers to teach children of diverse racial, ethnic, social class, and language backgrounds is a pressing issue in teacher education today and will continue to be for some time to come” (p. 20).

Research Question and Purpose of Study

The research question for this study was, How do preservice teachers’ perceptions of background differences and similarities evolve in the context of (prior to and during) a middle level teacher preparation program?

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions (i.e., awareness, acknowledgement, action) of preservice teachers regarding background differences and similarities (e.g., language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) as they evolved within the context of (prior to and during) a middle level teacher preparation program. The study is important in many ways. First, it sheds light on preservice teachers' perceptions of their own backgrounds and the backgrounds of their students. Understanding preservice teachers' perceptions of themselves and their current students with regard to background differences and similarities may help teacher educators and beginning teachers build relationships with students. Second, this study ought to help educators of preservice teachers consider the types of experiences offered in teacher preparation programs. For example, by providing authentic learning experiences that focus on knowledge of background differences and similarities, both in course content and in field experiences, preservice teachers may be better prepared to interact and connect with students of different backgrounds. Finally, this study contributes to the education literature about the concept of "perception" and perceptions of background difference and similarities, in particular.

Theoretical Framework

Teacher knowledge and teacher belief (both described in more detail in Chapter 2) form the base of the theoretical framework on which I framed this study. Both constructs, teacher knowledge (e.g., knowledge, familiarity, awareness, understanding) and teacher belief (e.g., personal, episodic, and emotional experiences), inform each other and are sometimes considered indistinguishable. In this study, I wanted to learn about middle level preservice teachers' perceptions of background differences and similarities. In addition, I wanted to understand how knowledge about background differences and similarities acquired prior to and during a middle

level teacher preparation program influenced preservice teachers' practice. Therefore, "perceptions" as a construct also helped frame my study.

Perception, as a concept is generally considered synonymous with beliefs. Belief, as a concept has multiple meanings in the literature. Attempting to "clean up a messy construct" (p. 307), Pajares (1992) declared that a wide range of terms are frequently used in place of each other: "attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions, ideology, perceptions, conceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions ..." (p. 309) were but a few of the terms used interchangeably in the literature. In her book entitled, *Educational Psychology* (6th ed.), Woolfolk (1995) defined perception as "the meaning we attach to the raw information received through our senses" (p. 245). Woolfolk's definition is similar to the definition of perception from the beginning of this study. At the conceptual phase of this study, I defined "perceptions" as understanding, awareness, or insight regarding background differences and similarities. Based upon my findings and for the purpose of this study, I define perceptions as awareness (conscious recognition of background differences and similarities), acknowledgement (professed intent to address background differences and similarities in teaching practice), and action (addressing background differences and similarities in teaching practice). Figure 1 provides a visual of the theoretical framework for this study.

Critical Concepts Defined

The following definitions were based on my own experiences as an educator, discussions with other educators, and readings of educational research. For the purposes of this study, the following critical concepts were defined: preservice teacher, knowledge, evolve, middle school teacher preparation program, and background difference.

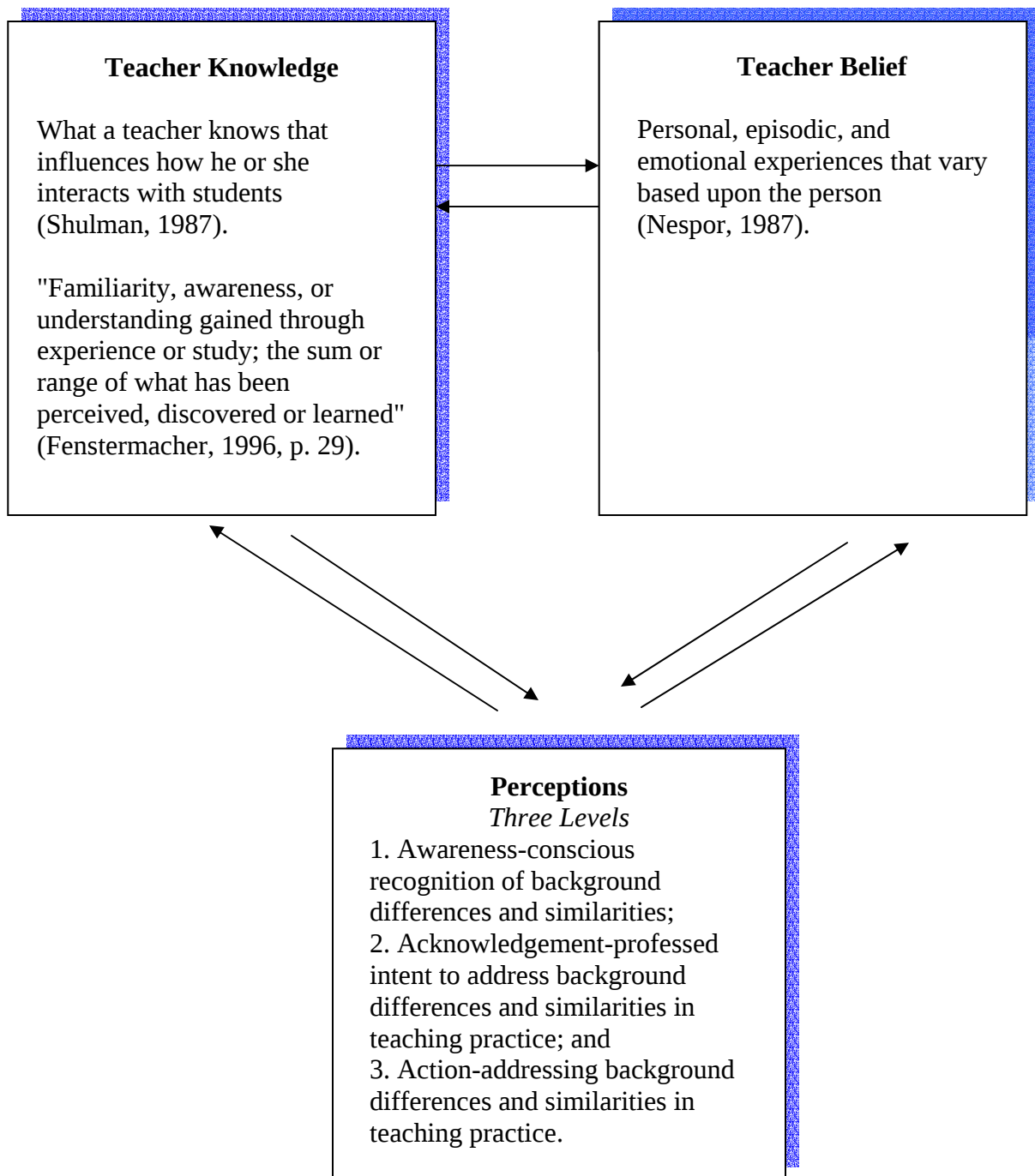


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

Preservice Teacher

In the middle school teaching methods book entitled, *Teaching Young Adolescents: A Guide To Methods And Resources* (4th ed.), Kellough and Kellough (2003) explained that “preservice is the term used when referring to a teacher in training, as opposed to an inservice teacher or a teacher who is employed” (p. 414). I elaborated on Kellough and Kellough's definition and for the purpose of this study, I define a preservice teacher as a student in a teacher preparation program, earning a teaching certificate, and preparing to enter the teaching profession.

Evolve

It was important for me to understand how a preservice teacher thinks about background differences and similarities over time. Are students aware of, acknowledging, or taking action in their teaching practices regarding background difference and similarities? How do perceptions evolve? For the purpose of this study, the concept “evolve” refers to thinking over a period of time, in particular, prior to and during a teacher preparation program. The evolution of preservice teachers’ perceptions over time may evolve in positive or negative ways. Positive evolution would indicate growth regarding awareness, acknowledgement, and action of background differences and similarities. Negative evolution would indicate more prejudice and reaffirming stereotypical beliefs about students with varying backgrounds. In this study, there is no assumption of a preferred direction.

Middle Level Teacher Preparation

For the purpose of this study, I defined middle level teacher preparation as a college- or university- designed program that prepares preservice teachers to educate young adolescents, generally students between the ages of 10 and 14. This definition is consistent with that of the

middle level teacher preparation program at The University of Georgia. The specialized preparation of middle level teachers is essential to ensuring that the unique educational needs of young adolescents are met (Jackson & Davis, 2000; McEwin & Alexander, 1986).

Middle School Program

For the purpose of this study, the Middle School Program (MSP) refers to life experiences associated with specific programmatic requirements for preservice teachers at The University of Georgia. Specific requirements include Area F (EFND 2030: Foundations of Education, EPSY 2020: Learning and Development in Education, SPED 2000: Survey of Special Education, and EDIT 2000: Introduction to Computers for Teachers), Preprofessional Experience Package, Application Materials (entrance essay, resume, transcripts), middle school coursework (EDMS 5020: Educating Young Adolescents, EDMS 5030: The Middle School Curriculum, EDMS 5460: Student Teaching, and EDMS 5040: Teaching in the Middle School), and content area coursework (e.g., mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts methods).

Background Differences and Similarities

At the conceptual phase of this study, I intended to study only background differences rather than background differences and similarities. I could find no definitive definition in the literature for the concept of background differences; therefore, I broadened my scope and turned to the educational literature to determine how researchers and scholars defined diversity, multiculturalism, multicultural education, cultural diversity, and culture within the context of teacher education. I read Banks (1995); Banks and Banks (1993); Darling-Hammond and Sclan (1996); Ladson-Billings (1995); Moll, Armanti, Neff, and Gonzalez (1992); Sleeter and Grant (2003); Zeichner and Hoeft (1995); and other educational scholars. Each person had his or her own definition, most often defined in terms of the research agenda of the scholar. For example,

some definitions were in broad terms (e.g., Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; Sleeter & Grant, 2003; Zeichner & Hoeft, 1995), while others focused on particular elements of diversity (e.g., race, gender, or ethnicity) and were specific (e.g., Banks, 1995; Banks & Banks, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

The amount of information included in the definitions also varied greatly. Some definitions simply contained a list of elements. Ethnicity or ethnic group identity, gender, race, social class, religion, age, family configuration, academic ability, handicapping conditions, learning disabilities, sexual orientation, and language abilities were sometimes identified as elements in the definitions. For example, Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2000) included “nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, class, language, sexual orientation, academic ability, and handicapping conditions” (p. xvii) as elements of diversity.

As I read the literature, I created a table (Table 1) to document definitions. The chart contained the following information: researcher or theorist, reference, and definition. After identifying twenty definitions, I concluded my search because I was no longer finding new or different information.

After completion of the chart I added a new column: What I like and why. Because I was interested in background differences, I felt it was important for me to think about each definition and what I liked about it. I thought this process would help me clarify my own thinking about background differences. The following table illustrates what definitions I liked and why.

The next step I took was crafting the definition of background differences that is appropriate to this study. I collapsed all those things I liked from the variety of definitions I documented and made another list. This list was too large and cumbersome—practically anything could be considered background difference. I needed to narrow my thoughts. I did this

Table 1

Definitions Related to Diversity: What I Like and Why

Researcher	Definition	What I Like and Why
Banks, J. A., & Banks, C. A. M. (Eds.). (1993). <i>Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives</i> (2 nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.	<u>Multicultural Education</u> : “It is at least 3 things: an idea or concept; an education reform movement; and a process” (p. 1). <u>Culture</u> : “The ideations, symbols, behaviors, values, and beliefs that are shared by a human group . . . a group’s program for survival and adaptation to the environment” (p. 357).	I like the acknowledgement of the complexity of multicultural education. One thing I have found to be true is that multicultural education is hard to define and explain. The definition of culture consists of those human traits that define people and make each group unique, but also includes the survival plans and adaptations to the environment. It does not negate any experience had by the group.
Sleeter, C. E., & Grant, C. A. (2003). <i>Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class, and gender</i> (4 th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.	<u>Multicultural Education</u> : “Umbrella concept that deals with race, culture, language, social class, gender, and disability . . . term most frequently extended to include additional forms of diversity” (p. 31).	I like the acknowledgement of multicultural education being an umbrella term that deals with many issues that make people different from one another and that the list of differences is not limited.
Sapon-Shevin, M. (1999). <i>Because we can change the world</i> . Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.	<u>Diversity</u> : Varying dimensions of size, age, skin color, religion, academic ability, race, gender, disabilities, and language abilities (p. 18-19).	I like the idea that diversity is not a “one size fits all” phenomena and I like the list of elements. It encompasses many of the elements of diversity that exist in educational settings.
Darling-Hammond, L., & Sclan, E. M. (1996). <i>Who teaches and why: Dilemmas of building a profession for twenty-first century schools</i> . In Sikula, J., Buttery, T. J., & Guyton, E. (Eds.), <i>Handbook of research on teacher education</i> (2 nd ed) (pp. 67-101). New York: Macmillan.	<u>Diversity</u> : Range of languages, cultures, exceptionalities, learning styles, talents, and intelligences that exist in the experiences students bring to school (p. 68).	I like the inclusion of “learning styles, talents, and intelligences;” this definition captures academic issues not widely included in many definitions of diversity.

Table 1 *continued*

Researcher	Definition	What I Like and Why
Pate, P. E., Yaksic, D., & Navarro, C. (2001). <i>Documenting our voices everywhere: A virtual web site and collaborative research opportunity.</i> (Unpublished manuscript).	<u>Cultural Context</u> : “Place of birth, schooling experiences, religion, personal and societal expectations, language(s) or dialect(s) spoken, familial structure and responsibilities, ethnicity, familiarity with formal schooling, as well as personal histories and experiences Societal structures within cultures, an introduction to languages, dialects, expectations, employment, educational opportunities, family structures, etc., individual students may have participated in or been exposed to, which, in turn, may have influenced their perspectives... DOVe is not seeking to provide definitions, but rather insight into cultural influences which otherwise might be misunderstood, misconstrued, or even ignored” (p. 3-4).	I like everything about this definition. It contains many layers of diversity that preservice teachers may notice about themselves and others. It lists many possible circumstances or experiences where diversity exists. The definition does not trivialize the elements of diversity. The broad scope provides enough limitations without being ambiguous.

by once again looking back at the literature. In my review of the literature regarding background differences and preservice teachers’ experiences with difference, I most often ran across references to language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns, and familial structure. These references became the framework for my definition. Therefore, I viewed, background differences are those distinguishing characteristics which are a part of every person, including language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns (e.g., patterns of relocation or moving from one place to another), and familial structures (e.g., type of family to which a person belongs, such as, one-parent, two-parent, foster, blended, nuclear, and divorced). In part, my definition of background differences took shape because of the existing literature and

previously conducted studies. I included concepts most often considered when studying differences between and among people, i.e., language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns, and familial structure. These concepts emerged on a consistent basis, which caused me to believe preservice teachers' perceptions of their own background and the background of their students with regard to language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns, and familial structure ought to be an important topic of study.

Based upon my findings, I added "similarities" to my concept of background differences because I found that student backgrounds can be both different from and similar to preservice teachers' backgrounds. I also revised my definition. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, I now define the concept of background differences and similarities (BDS) as distinguishing characteristics which are a part of every person and include language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns, familial structure, familial support, religion, gender, culture, home localities, students with disabilities, and students with varying abilities. Each of these distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities are described in detail in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I provide a review of the literature relevant to this study. In the first section, I examine research on teacher knowledge and teacher belief. Then, I explore the research on background differences and similarities (BDS) and preservice teachers' experiences with BDS. Finally, I present the literature on middle level teacher preparation and identify specific components of it.

Teacher Knowledge and Teacher Belief

Preservice teachers' perceptions, of both their own background and the background of their students, form the cornerstone of this study. Teacher knowledge and belief are closely related terms—terms that may be used synonymously by scholars (Pajares, 1992; Richardson, 1996). Several reviews of research on teacher knowledge and teacher belief (Calderhead, 1996; Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001; Nespor, 1987; Parajes, 1992; Richardson, 1996) indicated that within this body of literature, numerous research studies and theoretical papers seem to be addressing the same construct, but under different labels. The following list documents the variations of teacher knowledge and teacher belief that are commonly found in the literature:

Teacher Knowledge

Craft knowledge (Grimmett & MacKinnon, 1992); experiential knowledge (Borko & Putnam, 1996); subject matter knowledge (Shulman 1986, 1987); teachers' personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1992; Clandinin & Connelly, 1987; Elbaz, 1983); teachers' practical knowledge (Carter, 1990; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, Elbaz, 1983).

Teacher Belief

Attitudes and beliefs (Richardson, 1996; Bunting, 1984); belief (Nespor, 1987, Parajes, 1992); conceptions (Calderhead & Robson, 1991); opinions (Brousseau, Book, & Byers, 1988); perceptions (Brookhart & Freeman, 1992); and teacher perspectives (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984).

In the majority of the literature, it can be difficult to determine where knowledge ends and beliefs begin, and “Most constructs were simply different words meaning the same thing” (Parajes, 1992, p. 309). Calderhead (1996) validated this notion by stating, “It is sometimes difficult to identify the distinguishing features of beliefs and how they are to be separated from knowledge” (p. 719). Nonetheless, I have attempted to explain the aspects of teacher knowledge and teacher belief pertinent to this study.

According to Shulman (1987), knowledge is what a teacher knows that influences how he or she interacts with students, both personally and academically. Knowledge is not always learned from a book—it also comes from experience. Shulman identified several categories of teachers’ knowledge base:

content knowledge; general pedagogical knowledge with special reference to those broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization that appear to transcend subject matter; curriculum knowledge, with particular grasp of the materials and programs that serve as “tools of the trade” for teachers; pedagogical content knowledge, that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding; knowledge of learners and their characteristics; knowledge of education contexts, ranging from the workings of the group or classroom, the governance and financing of school districts, to the character

of communities and cultures; knowledge of educational ends, purposes, and values and their philosophical and historical grounds. (p. 8)

These categories indicate that teachers ought to possess knowledge beyond mere academics. Teachers must be knowledgeable about all things pertaining to teaching, be able to present the material in meaningful ways, have management and organizational strategies in place in their classrooms, be aware of the research about teaching and learning, and have flexible and comprehensive understandings of students of diverse backgrounds. Of these categories and for this study, I am most interested in the category of teachers' knowledge of learners and their characteristics. This category fits best because I am attempting to determine what preservice teachers' perceptions are regarding students who have backgrounds different from and similar to the preservice teacher.

Teachers' personal practical knowledge, a term coined and explained by Clandinin (1992), is also appropriate for this study. Clandinin combined teachers' personal knowledge and teachers' practical knowledge into one construct, teachers' personal practical knowledge, and offered the following description of teachers' personal practical knowledge:

We see personal practical knowledge as in the person's past experience, in the person's present mind and body and in the person's future plans and actions. It is knowledge that reflects the individual's prior knowledge and acknowledges the contextual nature of that teacher's knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge carved out of, and shaped by, situations; knowledge that is constructed and reconstructed as we live out our stories and retell and relive them through processes of reflection. (p. 125)

Personal practical knowledge is important in my study because it references the teachers' past experiences, prior knowledge, present situation, and future plans—all of which serve as

influential factors when interacting with students who have backgrounds different from the teachers. Gaining an understanding of students' language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns (e.g., patterns of relocation or moving from one place to another), and familial structures (e.g., type of family to which a person belongs, such as one-parent, two-parent, foster, blended, nuclear, and divorced) should positively influence teachers' personal practical knowledge.

The distinction between knowledge and belief is a difficult one to make (Bryan, 1997). Knowledge influences belief and vice versa. Kagan (1990) used belief and knowledge interchangeably. Using a compilation of dictionary definitions to explain knowledge, Fenstermacher (1994) posited that knowledge is "familiarity, awareness or understanding gained through experience or study; the sum or range of what has been perceived, discovered, or learned" (p. 29). Alexander, Schaller, and Hare (1991) defined knowledge as "an individual's personal stock of information, skills, experiences, beliefs, and memories" (p. 317). Furthermore, Cooney (1999) asserted that teacher knowledge and teacher belief are fuzzy constructs. At times, teacher knowledge and teacher belief are indistinguishable.

Nevertheless, Nespor (1987) identified four *features* of beliefs that separate belief from knowledge. Existential presumption, alternativity, affective and evaluative loading, and episodic structure are distinct features of belief. Existential presumptions may consist of the inherent, unquestioned, and personal truths that a person holds. As Pajares (1992) stated, "People believe them because, like Mount Everest, they are there" (p. 309). This feature may include belief in God, ESP, or conspiracy theories, for example, while general teacher beliefs about various students' ability, laziness, or maturity are also elements of this feature. Existential presumptions may translate "ambiguous, conditional or abstract characteristics into stable, well-defined,

absolute and concrete entities. . . such entities tend to be seen as immutable—as beyond the teacher’s control and influence” (Nespor, 1987, p. 318).

Alternativity, Nespor’s (1987) second identified feature of “beliefs,” defies reality and greatly differs from logic. Alternativity desires the ideal situation, whether or not it is attainable. Nespor described Ms. Skylark, an English teacher in her study, that based her class on a model of what she wanted her classes to be like when she was in school—fun and friendly (p. 318). Attempting to create this ideal situation in her class, Ms. Skylark often had unfinished lessons, random discussions, and off-task students—but the classroom atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. Ms. Skylark’s ideal classroom environment was inconsistent with effective classroom management and sound instructional practices. Nespor stated, “Such beliefs are not amenable to falsification—or even challenge—and failures to translate them into reality in no way diminish their value” (p. 319).

In addition, belief systems tend to rely heavily on affective and evaluative components (Nespor, 1987; Pajares, 1992). Feelings, moods, and subjective evaluations are based on personal preferences (Brindley, 1996; Nespor, 1987). For example, the enthusiasm a teacher feels toward the teaching of a course or the value placed on the course content may influence how he or she teaches. Affective and evaluative aspects of belief may have a direct link to the amount of energy expended on course activities (Bryan, 1997; Nespor, 1987).

Finally, Nespor (1987) asserted that beliefs exist in episodic memories, the content of which is derived from personal experience, episodes, events, and cultural sources of knowledge or cultural myths (p. 320). According to Bryan (1997), “The implications of this characteristic are especially important in education, as critical episodes or experiences influence and frame how one learns and how ones uses what is learned” (p. 13). Critical episodes may explain the

fact that teachers learn a lot about being a teacher through their own experiences as students. Crucial experiences during school or from an influential teacher may produce a “richly-detailed” (Nespor, 1987, p. 320) episodic memory that a teacher will recall later during his or her own career as an “inspiration and a template for his or her own teaching practices” (p. 320).

In addition to the aforementioned individual features of beliefs, belief systems also possess distinguishing characteristics (Nespor, 1987; Parajes, 1992; Rokeach, 1968). Belief systems, groups of similar beliefs, do not require general consensus—a person may have conflicting beliefs. Likewise, belief systems do not have a truth condition (Green, 1971) to satisfy. Belief systems generally remain unchanged as a person progresses through life. However, when beliefs do change, it is not due to argument or reason, but more than likely because of a “conversion or gestalt shift” (Nespor, 1987, p. 321). Incompatible or inconsistent beliefs may exist together as long as they are not examined in conjunction with one another (Bryan, 1997). Further, within belief systems, the more central the belief, the more difficult it is to change that belief (Rokeach, 1968). When considering all of the characteristics that describe beliefs and their differences from knowledge, Nespor (1987) contended that beliefs are a greater influence than knowledge on individual behaviors and beliefs serve as stronger predictors of behavior than knowledge does.

Finally, as Pajares (1992) declared, “The beliefs teachers hold influence their perceptions and judgments, which, in turn, affect their behavior in the classroom” (p. 307). Nespor (1987) validated the point by acknowledging that to understand what teachers do and how teachers act, “We have to understand the beliefs with which they define their work” (p. 323). Belief, as previously described, was primarily based on the work of Nespor (1987) and depicts the personal, episodic, and emotional experiences one has that are extremely variable.

Belief and knowledge are closely related and often used synonymously in the literature. To me, teacher knowledge and teacher belief are similar yet different constructs, but when taken together influence what a teacher does in the classroom. Perception involves aspects of teacher knowledge and teacher belief. In this study, I tried to determine how knowledge acquired prior to and during early participation in the University of Georgia Middle Level Teacher Preparation Program and preservice teacher beliefs influenced preservice teachers' perceptions of background differences and similarities. As previously discussed in Chapter 1 (Theoretical Framework), I define perceptions as awareness (conscious recognition of background differences and similarities), acknowledgement (professed intent to address background differences and similarities), and action (addressing background differences and similarities in teaching practice).

Background Differences and Similarities

In my review of background differences and similarities, I found few studies in the educational literature. Almost every study that examines BDS between preservice teachers and their future students cites statistics that expose the tremendous mismatch between the two groups.

Au and Blake (2003) defined "students of diverse backgrounds" as "students who are distinguished from the mainstream by social class, ethnicity, and primary language" (p. 192). They examined, in a qualitative case study, the effect of cultural identities on three preservice teachers' from diverse backgrounds. Through analysis of interviews, preservice teachers' writings from education courses, and weekly reflections, the researchers discovered that all three preservice teachers focused on instruction first and cultural characteristics second. In addition, Au and Blake contended that preservice teachers with cultural identities different from future students should benefit from educational experiences designed to prepare teachers to work in

diverse settings. Preservice teachers with an outsider perspective i.e. those who have had little understanding of or interactions with future students may develop critical understandings of the background characteristics of the student population being taught that may enable the preservice teachers to better connect with all students. Likewise, preservice teachers whose background characteristics are similar to their students will have an insider's perspective and may develop critical understandings of their own culture through the acquisition of content knowledge. In essence, preservice teachers with minimal cultural commonalities should learn about the culture of the students being taught as well as learn how to teach. Preservice teachers with the same cultural background may not recognize or may take for granted their knowledge of that culture. Nonetheless, when learning how to teach, the unique aspects of their culture may become evident. Thus, preservice teachers with similar cultural backgrounds to their students may gain a deeper understanding of their culture as they develop into classroom teachers.

In a related study, Xu (2000) wanted to know what preservice teachers' understandings of their own backgrounds are, what preservice teachers' understood about their students' backgrounds, and how the teachers' knowledge influenced literacy instruction. Xu modified Schmidt's ABC Model of Cultural Understanding and Communication (1998, 1999) in an attempt to answer the research questions. Schmidt's model was based on the following notions: a person must be familiar with his or her own cultural background before beginning to understand the cultural background of others, learning about other people's life experiences introduces one to others' cultures, and cross cultural analysis of both one's own and another's culture should develop awareness of the differences and similarities between those cultures. Schmidt's Model (1998, 1999) has five components:

1. An autobiography written by students that explains key life events that influenced the student's family, religion, education, etc;
2. The biography of a person culturally different from the student;
3. Cross-cultural analysis of the similarities and differences between stories;
4. Analysis of cultural differences to determine personal discomforts and positive affects; and,
5. Modified classroom practices and communication plans for developing home-school connections and enhancing literacy.

In Xu's modified model (2000), students wrote autobiographies focusing on cultural values and life experiences; wrote biographies about a student in the class where the field experience occurred; conducted cross-case analysis between the autobiography and student biography; analyzed the cultural difference and examined their discomforts with cross-cultural issues; and engaged in classroom activities focused on literacy development with their biography student.

Xu (2000) found that preservice teachers exhibited a variety of responses to cultural differences. Some of the preservice teachers held tightly to their beliefs even though the beliefs were based on stereotypes and bias. However, the majority of preservice teachers in this study had positive attitudes toward difference. Xu contended that the preservice teachers in the study "made efforts to begin a journey toward culturally responsive teaching" (p. 141). Nevertheless, the findings revealed that most preservice teachers' understanding of diversity within cultural contexts remains at a tangible or low level, a level such as knowledge of students' cultural values. Based on these findings, Xu asserted that teacher educators must create learning opportunities that encourage preservice teachers' to explore diversity while engaging in the teaching of diverse learners.

In their book, *Inequality At The Starting Gate: Social Background Differences In Achievement As Children Begin School*, Lee and Burkam (2002) studied the relationship between children's social background characteristics and their academic achievement in kindergarten. The authors based their study on the federal National Center for Education Statistics' Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-1999, which had 16,000 participants across the country (ECLS-K). Quantitative comparison of kindergarten students' scores on a math and reading test individually administered upon enrollment were compared to the students' race/ethnicity, e.g., White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian; and indicators of socioeconomic status (suburban or urban residence; number of books, records, tapes, or CDs in the home; owning a home computer; student participation in extra-curricular activities; attended a preschool other than Head Start). After several different statistical analyses, Lee and Burkam concluded that kindergartners' achievement in math and reading vary greatly depending on race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Although the findings were not new and not at the middle school level, Lee and Burkam documented that inequality in education starts before entering schools and is not necessarily a situation that begins with entry instruction.

Lee and Burkam's (2002) primary finding was important in the context of this study because preservice teachers must understand the educational experiences of their students, beginning before kindergarten. The students' BDS evident during preservice teachers' field experiences will have influenced the students' academic progress for a number of years. Acknowledging the influence of background difference on educational experiences will be important as preservice teachers develop relationships with and understandings of students of diverse backgrounds.

While there is limited research currently about background difference, the concept is becoming more prevalent. In the spring 2003 volume of the journal, *Review of Educational Research*, “defining difference differently” was identified as a topic for an upcoming theme issue. In the theme issue, engaging in a critical examination of difference is encouraged as is looking at difference differently. The traditional definition of diversity as “divergence from a White, Euro-American, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, upper-middle-class, Protestant, and English-speaking perspective” makes it difficult for various culture groups to “come to the table” (LeCompte, Klingner, Campbell, & Menk, 2003, p. iii). This theme issue call may mark the beginning of a move to view difference differently and examine what this might mean for the future of educational research and practice. This study contributes to the education literature about background differences and similarities and identifies new lenses through which educators may see and connect with their students.

Preservice Teachers’ Experiences with Differences and Similarities

Research about preservice teachers’ experiences with differences and similarities include various examples of teacher educators’ efforts to prepare preservice teachers for difference. The two primary means through which preservice teachers are prepared for difference are field experience and coursework.

Perhaps the first step in preparing preservice teachers to handle differences in their future classrooms is to determine what they know and how they feel about students with backgrounds different from their own as they begin their teacher education programs. Several teacher educators have conducted research using their own students, preservice teachers, as participants.

McFalls and Cobb-Roberts (2001) incorporated the theory of cognitive dissonance into their diversity course to determine if an alternative thinking approach might cause the university

students to be more open-minded during course activities. For clarification, cognitive dissonance is “a theoretical construct used to explain how people respond to information that does not coincide with their current understandings or beliefs” (p. 165). The majority of McFalls and Cobb-Roberts’ (2001) 124 undergraduate participants were White, middle-class women who attended a large predominately White university in the southeastern United States. The participants were divided into two groups, a treatment group who received an explanation of cognitive dissonance and a control group who received no information regarding cognitive dissonance. Both groups read the article, “White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack” by Peggie McIntosh (1990), provided written responses to readings, and participated in discussions. From analyzing the participants’ responses, three themes emerged: (1) awareness, (2) uncertainty, and (3) denial (p. 166).

The researchers purported that the use of cognitive dissonance theory as an instructional tool was successful. The participants who were introduced to the theory were less resistant to diversity topics and were more willing to accept topics that were different from what was previously known. In addition, McFalls and Cobb-Roberts (2001) suggested that regular use of cognitive dissonance as an instructional method might better prepare preservice teachers and make them more aware of the differences that exist between themselves and the students whom they will teach.

Knowing how preservice teachers feel about teaching culturally diverse students may be the first step in adequately preparing preservice teachers to teach culturally different students in various geographic locations. At Kutztown University in Pennsylvania, Shultz, Neyhart, and Reck (1996) surveyed 300 undergraduate preservice teachers about their beliefs and attitudes regarding culturally diverse students and about teaching in urban settings. The survey included

six open-ended questions and optional questions on demographic information. The researchers selected open-ended format for the main items because of the need to examine the undergraduates' responses to critical issues.

The four major themes that emerged from the study were (a) the participants thought that negative qualities within the students explained under-achievement and behavior problems from students who should have been able to do well academically; (b) the participants acknowledged the similarities that existed between themselves and urban students, but qualified their answers with explanations of their differences; (c) the participants noted that prejudice, stereotyping, and insensitivity were factors that influenced achievement of culturally diverse students, but did not consider themselves as part of the problem; and (d) the participants held beliefs about urban education, but had no experience to justify their beliefs.

According to the researchers, the participants' responses indicated that a new direction must be taken in teacher preparation programs so that prospective teachers are adequately prepared for teaching students with backgrounds different from their own. Preservice teachers need exposure to the realities of urban life and diverse students in order to reduce their biases and help them become effective teachers of all students.

By having preservice teachers define their notions of multicultural education and diversity, teacher educators might find ways to bridge the gap that exists between preservice teachers and students. Neuharth-Pritchett, Reiff, and Pearson (2001) surveyed 103 preservice teachers who were at varying levels of program completion in an undergraduate early childhood education program. Preservice teachers were asked to respond to four open-ended items:

1. There are many definitions of multicultural education and diversity. In your own words, please provide a definition of what you consider multicultural education to be.
2. How did you construct your definition of multicultural education? (Please include formal training and school-related experiences that have helped you mold your definition.)
3. If you have seen ways that multiculturalism has been used in schools, please provide at least three examples of how this was done or what you observed.
4. What is your perception of how multiculturalism should be promoted in school settings? (p. 259)

The researchers identified three categories into which the responses fell: minimal understanding, moderate understanding, and strong understanding. The majority of preservice teacher responses indicated that preservice teachers viewed multicultural education as snippets to be included in the curriculum, but not a concept to be regularly included in teaching practices. Observations, field placements, and personal experiences reinforced this belief. Encounters with students in the elementary schools tended to cause the preservice teachers to negatively categorize students and to draw a line between the students and themselves, thus creating an “us” and “them” concept of diversity (Neuharth-Pritchett et al., 2001, p. 267). Overall, the results of the study suggested that regardless of the stage of professional development, incorporating, teaching, and developing an understanding of multicultural education remains an area of struggle for most preservice teachers.

In a related study, Van Hook (2002) investigated the perceived barriers that preservice teachers hold, barriers that influence their ability to implement a multicultural curriculum. Van Hook asked 68 sophomores enrolled in an early childhood education program to reflect on their

beliefs regarding obstacles that may hinder the successful implementation of a diversity curriculum, as well as barriers that might hinder the progress of a diverse classroom community. Van Hook analyzed the students' writings and categorized the beliefs into four major themes: (a) preservice teachers' difficulty discussing sensitive topics; (b) policies and practices detrimental to diversity; (c) preservice teachers' difficulty implementing diversity curriculum; and (d) the preservice teachers' inability to recognize and accept diversity. The conflict, controversy, and potential upset that the preservice teachers believed might erupt from introducing diverse topics (religion, racial inequality, gender issues) into classrooms were enough to make the preservice teachers reluctant to engage in activities related to the topics. Rather than disturb the status quo, the potential teachers thought it was safer to maintain it.

Van Hook (2002) contended, "The true barriers to creating a diverse classroom are the obstacles perceived by the teachers" (p. 262). She also asserted, "One goal of teacher education should be the destruction of these barriers in order for teachers to integrate diversity into the curriculum" (p. 262). Finally, she suggested that both preservice teachers and teacher educators should reflect on their beliefs and attitudes to eliminate the faulty barriers that hinder understandings of diverse learners.

Curious about the relationship between the increasing numbers of White, female, middle-class teachers entering the work force and the growing number of culturally diverse students in classrooms, Terrill and Mark (2000) wanted to know how their efforts to prepare preservice teachers for cultural diversity corresponded to preservice teachers' attitudes about teaching in culturally diverse settings. The findings from surveys and questionnaires indicated that the majority of preservice teachers desired student teaching placements in schools with populations that were not culturally diverse and that preservice teachers had significantly different

expectations for students depending on the school and its composition. In addition, preservice teachers had significantly small degrees of comfort regarding working with African-American students and second-language learners.

Terrill and Mark (2000) realized that their efforts to teach about and prepare preservice teachers for diversity conflicted with the attitudes of the preservice teachers. They stated, “Teacher educators can no longer assume that all preservice teachers are ready to teach all learners in all settings” (p. 154). Given this, preservice teacher education programs might not be able to enlighten and enhance all preservice teachers’ understandings regarding cultural diversity.

Together, McFalls and Cobb-Roberts (2001), Neuharth-Pritchett et al. (2001), Schultz et al. (1996), Terrill and Mark (2000), and Van Hook (2002) revealed that preservice teachers hold many ideas about diversity and classroom differences that might be difficult to change. Preservice teachers’ understandings of multiculturalism, differences among students, and differences between themselves and students may be quite challenging to teacher educators when trying to prepare preservice teachers to teach all students.

Schultz et al. (1996), Neuharth-Pritchett et al. (2001), and Van Hook (2002) concluded that differences among preservice teachers’ personal practical knowledge were the largest obstacles to preservice teachers’ successful handling of student differences. Terrill and Mark (2000) made a strong point when acknowledging that all preservice teachers may not be ready or willing to teach in diverse settings. Teacher education programs face many challenges when it comes to identifying the areas of greatest concern for successfully educating and preparing preservice teachers to engage in meaningful interactions with students of diverse backgrounds. Nonetheless, several universities have created learning experiences that gradually expose

preservice teachers to background difference and, in some instances; universities have created entire classes that focus on diversity.

Students with backgrounds different from their teachers abound in many of the schools where preservice teachers will eventually teach. Through implementation of a university-school partnership, Schoorman (2002) attempted to close the cultural knowledge gap between minority students and preservice teachers who were often White, middle-class females. The electronic correspondence partnership employed in her class, described below, created opportunities for preservice teachers to interact with and learn about students in an economically challenged, culturally diverse school that would normally have been too far for the preservice teachers to travel. The e-mail exchange was valuable in many ways for all parties involved.

Designed as a teaching tool in a multicultural class, Schoorman (2002) used the e-mail correspondences between preservice teachers and middle school students to promote an understanding of multicultural issues in education. In the first phase of the study, the establishment of 56 preservice teacher-middle school student partnerships occurred. In an effort to ensure that both groups of students, i.e., the preservice teachers and middle school students, benefited from the exchange, the preservice teachers were to focus on developing and enhancing the literacy skills of the middle school students while gaining information about students with backgrounds different from their own. Having two classes of preservice teachers and two classes of middle school students involved in this project proved to be a time-consuming, challenging task for both educators. In the second phase of the study, Schoorman (2002) and the cooperating teacher implemented a few changes to make the project easier to manage and more relevant to both the preservice teachers and middle school students. The first change was the establishment of only 30 preservice teacher-middle school student partnerships. By only involving one class of

preservice teachers and one class of middle school students, Schoorman and her colleague were better able to monitor the interactions and learning of all involved. Second, in addition to the preservice teachers traveling to the middle school to meet the students, the middle school students embarked upon a field trip to the university. Finally, to build stronger curricular ties into the correspondence, the preservice teachers and middle school students had to explore topics from the middle school students' social studies curriculum. Schoorman (2002) contended that the project was a success. To her, the preservice teachers were profoundly influenced by the experience. She claimed that the preservice teachers enhanced their knowledge of abstract concepts, became aware of their biases and gaps in their culture-based and experiential knowledge, increased their critical self-reflection skills, and developed a greater action orientation toward doing something for others.

The opportunity to reflect separately from the e-mail exchange greatly enhanced and developed the preservice teachers' awareness of multicultural education, and provided preservice teachers opportunities to reflect on their actions without feelings of guilt, anger, or resistance (Schoorman, 2002). The importance of developing into a reflective practitioner and the opportunity to use these skills early in their teacher preparation programs might make these preservice teachers more aware of cultural differences later in their careers.

Encouraging reflection about actions and feelings is a strong strategy to use when working with preservice teachers. Not only did Cochran-Smith (1995) encourage reflection, but she also designed learning opportunities that encouraged preservice teachers to work *against the grain* or against traditional, monocultural teaching practices, with regard to diversity in the classroom. Her activities encouraged preservice teachers to move beyond *basket making*, that is

teaching about a random aspect of non-Anglo cultures (pp. 404-405) and to truly teach in ways that met the needs of a diverse population of students.

When working with preservice teachers, Cochran-Smith (1995) provided opportunities for the prospective teachers to examine their own beliefs related to the nature of power relationships in schools. Cochran-Smith developed inquiry projects for preservice teachers to experience critical self-reflection. She identified five perspectives for student teachers to analyze themselves during their preservice teacher preparation program: (1) reconsidering personal knowledge and experience, (2) locating teaching within the culture of the school and community, (3) analyzing children's learning opportunities, (4) understanding children's understanding, and (5) constructing reconstructionist pedagogy (p. 500).

Using preservice teachers' essay excerpts, Cochran-Smith (1995) made connections between the literature and student teachers' experiences. She suggested that teacher preparation methods must change if teacher educators are going to appropriately prepare student teachers for an increasingly diverse society in terms of language, race, and culture. However, she contended that it is not only preservice teachers that need to be prepared to actively and intelligently incorporate cultural diversity into the classrooms, but also practicing educators. Cochran-Smith suggested that all educators, regardless of years in the field, need to reexamine their practices to ensure that the best learning opportunities are being provided to the diverse student populations that exist in American schools.

Cochran-Smith (1995) and Schoorman (2002) implemented different strategies in order to prepare preservice teachers to understand and appreciate the differences that might be encountered in their classrooms. The different approaches appeared to be successful in their immediate settings. However, the difficulty lies in trying to determine if the immediate results of

the programs will stick with the preservice teachers or fade when they enter their own classrooms. Cochran-Smith's work moved a step beyond the other researchers mentioned in this section because she called for change by all educators, not just accommodations for or by student teachers.

By designing a multicultural education course that wove prospective teachers' personal experiences about learning into the instructional processes, Reyes, Capella-Santana, and Khisty (1998) used preservice teachers' personal experiences to support and validate multicultural objectives as they were introduced in the class. The authors' intent for the integration was to

. . . maximize participants' seeing multicultural education as something emanating from them. It was assumed that once a person had placed multicultural concepts within her or his own life, the knowledge constructed by the self could be used as a bridge to understanding a perspective outside the self. (p. 112)

The authors encouraged active participation in discussions among all of the preservice teachers. The authors deliberately asked questions to ignite debate, higher order thinking, and reflection. The open discussions created a non-threatening opportunity for the prospective teachers to change their attitudes, beliefs, or perceptions about multiculturalism.

Wanting a way to measure the effectiveness of their method, Reyes et al. (1998) analyzed preservice teachers' progress during the course. The researchers asserted that the 31 students in this multicultural education course experienced substantial personal growth and greatly enhanced or expanded their perspectives about cultural diversity with regard to educational settings. The attitudes, beliefs, and practices of the preservice teachers were deeply affected by their experiences in the class and by learning from each other. In addition, they realized that education about difference is something that extends beyond the classroom and into their own lives.

Making learning experiences life experiences is an idea that Wiggins and Follo (1999) have examined. At Oakland University in Michigan, Wiggins and Follo studied the effects of field placements on elementary education preservice teachers' readiness and willingness to teach in culturally diverse schools. The 123 elementary education participants, most of who were female and White, responded to pre- and post-semester questionnaires regarding multicultural issues. The 34 statements were divided into three broad categories: "factors fostering readiness for teaching in culturally diverse settings, factors constraining readiness for teaching in culturally diverse settings, and prior experiences relative to multicultural education" (p. 98). Analysis of responses indicated that Oakland University was making a superb effort preparing its preservice teachers for teaching in culturally diverse schools. The preservice teachers reported, "They were well prepared for the academic responsibilities they will encounter as teachers in culturally diverse classrooms" (p. 101). However, little change or enhancement of their comfort levels and understandings of different cultures resulted from the field experience. Wiggins and Follo (1999) speculated that some of the experiences provided in culturally diverse settings might have reinforced some preservice teachers' negative perceptions of traditional minority groups. They contended that it is not pedagogical knowledge that is lacking, but personal knowledge that must be constructed so that preservice teachers truly understand and appreciate culturally diverse communities within which they will work. Finally, the researchers concluded the preservice teachers must become involved in the school and surrounding community, thus, making learning experiences a part of their life experiences. Through preservice teacher, and eventual teacher, involvement in the community, the teachers' lives and students' lives may interlink and build connections between the two groups.

Preservice teachers' minimal life experiences, their minimal learning experiences in diverse settings, and the initial mismatch in backgrounds between preservice teachers and students are all factors that might negatively influence the development of preservice teachers' understandings of their future students. However, teacher educators can hope that some of the lessons taught in their courses will remain with the preservice teachers as they travel into new territories and begin their teaching careers.

As indicated in each of these studies, teacher educators are interested in and committed to preparing preservice teachers for differences and similarities. The best practices and methods for this type of instruction have yet to be discovered. According to Melnick and Zeichner (1995), no single teaching method about diversity has produced outcomes that provide convincing evidence of enduring impact on teacher and instructional practices. Nonetheless, the various methods used to teach about difference could possibly represent the many ways that difference exists in the world. Using the resources available, teacher educators should do their best to prepare preservice teachers for the profession.

Middle School Teacher Preparation

Most highly effective middle school teacher preparation programs have a common purpose which is "to prepare teachers to work with young adolescents in developmentally appropriate educational environments" (Swaim & Stefanich, 1996, p.3). Likewise, in NMSA's (1995) position paper, *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools*, the most significant characteristic of developmentally responsive middle schools was identified as "educators committed to young adolescents" (p. 11). In addition, the discussion of this characteristic provides further evidence for educators to be prepared specifically for teaching in middle level classrooms (p.14).

NMSA and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 1986) have provided a comprehensive framework for institutions to follow for middle grades teacher preparation, but specific program designs vary among institutions of higher education. Regardless of the program design, common and essential characteristics of highly effective programs do exist. Five fundamental characteristics of middle level teacher preparation programs include (1) courses that develop a deep and multifaceted understanding of the nature and needs of young adolescents; (2) courses that develop specific knowledge about the middle school concept and organization; (3) courses that focus on the teaching of methods and reading courses that are tailored to the needs of young adolescents; (4) selection of academic specializations in two content areas in addition to a broad academic background; and (5) early and continuous field experiences in exemplary middle schools (Jackson & Davis, 2002; McEwin & Alexander, 1986; McEwin & Dickinson, 1995; McEwin, Dickinson, Erb, & Scales, 1995).

Presumably, teacher education programs' adherence to the five fundamental characteristics ought to produce highly effective middle school teachers. Three of the five characteristics focus on university instruction of preservice teachers. The other two characteristics highlight crucial aspects of middle level preservice teacher development—field experiences and academic specializations.

Teacher education courses that develop a deep and multifaceted understanding of the nature and needs of young adolescents lay the foundation on which all other recommended characteristics build (McEwin & Alexander, 1986; McEwin & Dickinson, 1995; McEwin et al., 1995). Preservice teachers must understand young adolescents before preparing to teach and interact with them. Muth and Alvermann (1999) stated “Early adolescent transition is a distinct phase requiring special understanding of the conjunction of changes that a young person is

undergoing and that have a bearing on learning” (p. 9). Middle school teachers ought to understand the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social needs of young adolescents and that the needs of young adolescents differ greatly from students of elementary or high school. In addition, middle school teachers ought to have an understanding of their students’ background differences and similarities so that they are able to build meaningful personal connections and teaching practices.

Field experiences in exemplary middle schools need to be provided early and throughout the entire teacher preparation program (Butler, Davies, & Dickinson, 1991; McEwin & Alexander, 1986; McEwin & Dickinson, 1995; McEwin et al., 1995). These field experiences are crucial in middle level education. Preservice teachers must be aware of the special developmental needs and changes among young adolescents and be committed to teaching these individuals. Field experiences, early in the teacher preparation program, allow preservice teachers to witness young adolescents in action, gain first-hand knowledge and understanding about their behavior, and provide opportunities to practice what has been learned in university courses. In addition, early field experiences allow preservice teachers to begin to explore the elements of their own backgrounds that make them different from or similar to their students. By providing teacher preparation experiences that focus on knowledge of background difference, both in course content and in field experiences, preservice teachers may be better prepared to interact and connect with students of diverse backgrounds.

The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform’s policy statement on teacher preparation (2002) also emphasized the need for specific teacher education programs that train middle level preservice teachers. The Forum contended, “Middle-level teacher preparation programs must be different from programs designed to prepare teachers of young children in

elementary schools or older adolescents in high school” (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2002). Young adolescents need and deserve to be educated by teachers specifically prepared to be experts in their profession who desire to work with middle school students (McEwin & Dickinson, 1995). Participation in highly effective middle school undergraduate teacher preparation programs creates middle school teachers who are cognizant of the nature and needs of young adolescents and are able to work with them successfully. This study intentionally links middle school teacher preparation with preservice teachers’ perceptions of background differences and similarities.

Summary

This review of the literature described and explained teacher knowledge and teacher belief, examined research focused on preservice teachers’ understanding of background differences and preservice teachers’ experiences with difference, and discussed the need for middle grades teacher preparation programs. All of these components create the foundation of this study, the purpose of which was to understand the perceptions (i.e., awareness, acknowledgement, action) of preservice teachers regarding background differences and similarities (e.g., language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) as they evolved within the context (prior to and during) of a middle level teacher preparation program.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions (i.e., awareness, acknowledgement, action) of preservice teachers regarding background differences and similarities (e.g., language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status) as they evolved within the context (prior to and during) of a middle level teacher preparation program. This chapter presents the methodological framework of the study through discussion within the following sections: design, site selection and context of the program, participants, pilot interviews, data sources, data analysis, and researcher biases.

Design

Qualitative research attempts to understand human behaviors, beliefs, and perceptions. According to Merriam (1988), the objective of qualitative research is to understand the meaning of an experience. Qualitative methods help researchers explore what people think or believe through interviews, what people do through observations, and the products or artifacts that are used in everyday life through archival analysis. Qualitative research produces descriptive data: peoples' own written or spoken words and observable behaviors. Qualitative research can shed light on old problems by asking new questions. Qualitative research often asks the question "What is happening here?" It can provide responses to the question "What does this mean?" Finally, qualitative research provides explanations that help people understand human concepts—the essence of which might be lost in other research (DeMarrais, 2002). Through qualitative research, this study answered the question, "How do preservice teachers' perceptions

of background difference (BDS) evolve in the context (prior to and during) of a middle school teacher preparation program?” I examined preservice teachers’ perceptions of BDS in the context of a middle level teacher preparation program. .

When engaging in qualitative research, five underlying assumptions must be acknowledged (Creswell, 1994). The first assumption is that of ontology. Ontology refers to the nature of reality. The qualitative researcher must accept that multiple realities exist in any given situation and that research is subjective. As such, the researcher and participants might have different yet similar interpretations of reality. Given the range of experiences among the preservice teachers in this study and my own, our interpretations of reality might be different. However, none of the interpretations were viewed as incorrect, and all interpretations were viewed as credible.

Epistemology, the second assumption, refers to peoples’ ways of knowing (Creswell, 1994). In qualitative research, the researcher interacts with the research; thus, the researcher’s knowledge of the topic affects his or her ways of knowing. The relationship between the researcher and participants was strong. My interest in preservice teachers and their perceptions of BDS among students influenced my way of knowing, which influenced my overall perspective and specifically my future research and teaching endeavors.

Third, the assumption of axiology recognizes the role of values and biases in the study (Creswell, 1994). Axiology assumes that a researcher holds preconceived ideas about the topic under investigation and forces the researcher to admit his or her values and biases. In this study, I openly acknowledged my biases. I did have preconceived ideas about preservice teacher education and preservice teachers’ perceptions of background differences and similarities. I added credibility to the study by acknowledging my biases at the onset of this study.

Rhetoric, the fourth assumption, refers to the language used in qualitative research. According to Creswell (1994), the language in qualitative research is informal and personal. The language used in this study followed this pattern. Any person interested in BDS between preservice teachers and students ought to be able to read and understand this study.

Finally, qualitative research has a methodological assumption. Methodology refers to the process a researcher uses to perform the study. These processes in qualitative research are inductive, emergent, context-bound, and verifiable as well as accurate and reliable (Creswell, 1994). As previously stated, a qualitative research methodology was used in this study to discover how preservice teachers' perceptions of background differences and similarities evolve in the context (prior to and during) of a middle grades teacher preparation program. In-depth analysis of archival data and interviews attempted to tell the story of each participant to answer the research question. Use of qualitative research methods provided a thorough description of each participant's perceptions of background differences and similarities.

Qualitative research can assume many forms. For example, ethnography, autoethnography, phenomenology, case study, and narrative inquiry are just a few forms (Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). The type of qualitative research that I used in this study was narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Narrative inquiry, according to Connelly and Clandinin (1990), is "...the study of ways humans experience the world" (p. 2). Narrative inquiry is both phenomenon and method. In this study, the phenomenon to be studied is background differences and similarities and the method is narrative. Narrative inquiry is the study of stories. According to Arellano, Barcenal, Bilbao, Castellano, Nichols, and Tippins (2001), narrative inquiry is a means for understanding experience through exploration of storytelling. As a narrative researcher, I am describing the lives and telling the stories

(narratives) of four preservice middle school teachers regarding their perceptions of background differences and similarities.

Connelly and Clandinin (1994) identified four assumptions inherent in narrative inquiry. The first assumption is that teacher education is lifelong. In this study, I examined preservice middle school teachers perceptions of BDS prior to (growing up) and during the middle school program. A second assumption is that past, present, and future experiences are always in our minds. In this study I told stories tracing the experiences with BDS of the participants from their early years through their first year in the middle school program (MSP). A third assumption is that teaching is an educative relationship among people—a sharing process. Central to narrative inquiry is “restorying” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Restorying includes reading the transcript, writing the story, analyzing the story to understand the lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and then retelling the story. In this study, the stories told by the participants became a sharing and retelling process, among them and with me, the narrative researcher. The fourth assumption is that teacher education is a continuum—it is ongoing throughout the preservice years and into the profession. In this study, I was interested in examining the perceptions of preservice teachers regarding BDS across the years. What were their perceptions of BDS prior the MSP? As a student in the MSP? In particular, I was interested in determining their level of perception. Was it at the awareness (conscious recognition of BDS) level? Was it at the acknowledgement (professed intent to address BDS in their current and future teaching practice) level? Or was it at the action (addressing background differences and similarities in their current teaching practice) level?

Site Selection and Context of the Program

The site selected for my study was The University of Georgia's Middle School Program. The middle school program offers undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as certification options. The variety of options provided ensures that the needs of all students in the program will most likely be met.

The middle school program admits approximately 50 preservice teachers per academic year. Generally, these students are entering at the undergraduate level. However, some students who are seeking initial certification and master's degrees may comprise some of the 50. Prior to entering the program, prospective students engage in a preprofessional experience. During this preprofessional experience, students volunteer 100 hours of their time with young adolescents. At least half of this time must be spent in settings with young adolescents whose backgrounds are different from the students' own. The preprofessional experience facilitates opportunities for students to engage in activities that might be outside their comfort zone and may open the students' eyes to the background differences that abound in schools.

Once in the middle grades teacher preparation program, students select two areas of academic specialization, which in part determine the course of their educational career. Their specialization areas influence, depending on the availability of the mentor teachers, the location and grade level of field experiences, as well as, determine what content area courses the students will take.

The selection of two specialization areas—math, science, language arts, or social science—has a direct effect on the location and grade level of their field experiences. In each of three middle school methods courses, EDMS 5020: Educating the Young Adolescent; EDMS 5030: The Middle School Curriculum; and EDMS 5460: Student Teaching in the Middle School,

preservice teachers are placed in a local school where they engage in a field experience under the supervision of a previously selected mentor teacher.

During the field experience, preservice teachers interact with students in a variety of ways. Generally, preservice teachers begin their field experience by working individually with students, facilitating cooperative group activities, and assisting the teacher however possible. They progress to teaching the entire class of students more and more often over the course of the three field experiences. Through interactions with students and practicing teachers, preservice teachers learn about the profession in practical ways and develop their personal practical knowledge of teaching.

In EDMS 5020: Educating Young Adolescents, during their first formal field experience in the fall of the junior year, middle school preservice teachers work with teachers who are certified to teach in the preservice teachers' secondary specialization area. During EDMS 5030: The Middle School Curriculum (fall of the senior year) and EDMS 5460: Student Teaching in the Middle School (spring of the senior year), preservice teachers work cooperatively with teachers who maintain certification to teach in the preservice teachers' first area of specialization. In addition to changes in content area in each field experience, the grade level, and often the location (i.e., urban, suburban, rural) change. In sum, preservice teachers in the middle school program engage in three field experiences: one in their secondary area of specialization and two in their first area, and their field experiences occur in two different grade levels in two of the following settings, rural, suburban, or urban. EDMS 5040 Teaching in the Middle School (immediately following student teaching) is taught in a one-week intense, conference-style format. Dependent upon the needs of the students, sessions may include such

things as legal issues, classroom management, teacher-parent relationships, and teacher-school accountability.

The courses taught by faculty and graduate students in the Middle School Program, EDMS 5020, EDMS 5030, EDMS 5460, and EDMS 5040 build on each other to prepare preservice teachers for the profession. When finished with the program, the students have a wide range of experiences on which to draw, experiential knowledge about young adolescents in different settings, and a variety of teaching skills. The learning experiences provided ideally create middle school teachers who are skilled, competent, and ready to enter the profession.

In addition to field experiences in three of the four middle school courses, students in the program compile a professional portfolio. Portfolio creation formally begins in EDMS 5020: Educating the Young Adolescent and continues throughout the program. For example, preservice teachers continually reflect on their teaching philosophy and periodically revise it. As preservice teachers engage in new learning activities or broaden their understanding of previously learned information, they modify and add to the portfolio. The final portfolio should accurately represent the preservice teachers' professional development. In addition to creating a professional portfolio, in each middle school course preservice teachers engage in discussions and learning activities that prepare them for teaching. The majority of discussions and learning activities focus on the social, emotional, physical, moral, and cognitive characteristics of young adolescents; understanding the middle school concept; planning appropriate lessons; knowing students well; and developing effective teaching practices.

This study specifically focused on the activities related to Area F (EFND 2030: Foundations of Education, EPSY 2020: Learning and Development in Education, SPED 2000: Survey of Special Education, and EDIT 2000: Introduction to Computers for Teachers),

Preprofessional Experience Package (see Appendix A for Preprofessional Experience Reflection Questions), Application Materials (entrance essay, resume, transcripts), middle school coursework (EDMS 5020: Educating Young Adolescents, EDMS 5030: The Middle School Curriculum, EDMS 5460: Student Teaching, and EDMS 5040: Teaching in the Middle School), and content area coursework (e.g., mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts methods).

Participants

It was important for me to hear what middle school preservice teachers had to say about BDS for several reasons. First, I will be a teacher of preservice teachers. I wanted to know their perceptions of BDS. As a narrative researcher, I was also interested in their perceptions. I wanted to learn as much as I could about BDS in hope of improving educational experiences of middle level teachers and the students and parents with whom they interact.

Participants for this study were selected from the 50 undergraduate middle school preservice teachers who had completed their first semester in the program. According to Patton (2002), “There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry.... in-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are information-rich” (p. 244). In addition, Patton asserted, “The sample, like all other aspects of qualitative inquiry, must be judged in context” (p. 245). The selection process used was based on “purposeful random sampling” (Patton, 2002, p. 240).

Purposeful random sampling involves selecting a sample from a population in which discovery, understanding, or insight will result (Merriam 1998; Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling was used in this study because the population of participants was among a select group

of people; not everyone met the criteria for selection. Criteria for selection were (1) admittance to the middle grades teacher preparation program; (2) successful completion of the first methods course, EDMS 5020: Educating Young Adolescents and related field experience; and (3) having undergraduate status.

According to Patton (2002), “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich participants for study in depth. Information-rich participants are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of inquiry...” (p. 230). In addition, Patton purported that the use of random sampling will increase the credibility of the results.

In this study, I viewed all potential participants as information-rich storytellers regardless of gender, age, or ethnicity. The students who completed the first methods course (EDMS 5020: Educating Young Adolescents) were the focus of this study because of their progress in the program. I was especially interested in this group of preservice teachers because they are beginning to form personal practical knowledge about teaching and students, especially students with backgrounds different from their own. In my opinion and based on my own experience, it is during the beginning stage in teacher preparation programs where preservice teachers cement ideas, thoughts, and beliefs into reality. Once ideas, thoughts, or beliefs become a permanent part of the preservice teacher’s knowledge base, changing or adapting the knowledge base may be hard to do. I wanted to know what preservice teachers thought about BDS and if they became aware of, acknowledged, or took action in their teaching practices regarding background differences and similarities.

Through purposeful random sampling, I selected four undergraduate middle grades preservice teachers to participate in this study. Names of all middle school undergraduate

preservice teachers that met the selection criteria and had successfully completed EDMS 5020: Educating Young Adolescents during the fall semester of 2003 were placed in a box and four names were drawn. This was the beginning of the narrative process.

In narrative inquiry, negotiation of entry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990) begins the storytelling process. Negotiation of entry "...is an ethical matter framed in terms of principles that establish responsibilities for both researchers and practitioners" (p. 3). For this study, negotiation of entry was established in two ways. First, I had a prior relationship with all four of the selected participants. Three of selected participants had been students in the EDMS 5020 middle school course that I taught the previous fall. I had observed the fourth selected participant during her EDMS 5020 field experience the previous fall. Second, during a telephone conversation with each selected participant, I discussed the context of the study, roles and responsibilities for participants and the researcher, the fact that there would be no right or wrong answers, and the potential benefits for us (as educators) and the field of education. Each of the first four preservice teachers selected agreed to participate on the spot. The selection process and negotiation of entry was complete. Equality between participants, a caring situation, and feelings of connectedness had been established. (Note: All identifying participant names in this study are pseudonyms).

Data Sources

Data collection for this study began after Fall 2003 academic semester grades were posted and was completed during the Spring 2004 academic semester. Data came from Area F, the preprofessional experience, and the junior year of the program.

Data are nothing more than ordinary bits and pieces of information found in the environment. They can be concrete and measurable, as in class attendance, or invisible

and difficult to measure as in feelings. Whether or not a bit of information becomes data in a research study depends solely on the interest and perspective of the investigator.

(Merriam, 1998, p. 68)

Multiple data sources were used in this study to create the narratives. Data sources, all appropriate for narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990), included participant-generated artifacts, three individual interviews, one focus group interview, teaching metaphors, Venn diagrams, and a fieldwork journal. Use of multiple data sources increased apparency (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) of the study. Apparency refers to the clarity of the storytelling. In this study it was important to capture words, phrases, nuances, and experiences to tell stories about background differences and similarities.

Artifacts

According to Merriam (1998), finding relevant artifacts to collect and analyze is the first step in the qualitative process. Artifacts help ground a study and add richness to the story. For the purpose of this study, artifacts were preservice teacher-generated documents. These items were found in the preprofessional experience package, initial application materials, and professional portfolios. Specific archival items include preprofessional experience reflective questions; application materials—entrance essay and resume; portfolio-middle school learners chart, shadow study, strengths paper, students' letter of introduction to the mentor teacher, original and revised philosophy of teaching, resume, lesson plans, teaching strategy summary, classroom guidance plan, reflective journal, and final exam.

Interviews: Individual and Focus Group

The purpose of interviewing is to “allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful,

knowable, and able to be made explicit” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). Interviews provide information for the narrative that is not directly observable, such as preservice teachers’ perceptions of background difference and the evolution of that knowledge.

Prior to actually interviewing the participants, I conducted pilot interviews with two doctoral students who were familiar with the interview process, interview techniques, and questioning strategies to employ during interviews. Based on the two pilot interviews—conducted separately, but using the same interview protocol and process, I made the following changes to the protocol and process.

Changes to the interview process were few. I needed to limit my personal responses to participant responses, not give evaluative responses to participants when they finished providing an answer, and make sure that my body language was an effective communication tool. During the first pilot interview, I practiced asking questions. In the second pilot interview, I monitored my responses and contributions to the dialogue; however, I learned that my body language conveyed unintended messages. For example, toward the middle of the interview, I placed my hand near my chin and leaned on it. My participant interpreted this gesture as boredom and disinterest—neither of which were true. I needed to know all of these things before actually conducting interviews with participants so that I did not inadvertently make mistakes that might have skewed the interview results.

Nonetheless, not all of my behaviors during the interview were negative. Both pilot interview participants liked the conversational format that I established early in the interview and noted that I did not try to stop their rambling answers. According to the pilot interview participants, I effectively redirected them as needed, connected their answers to the questions or

easily brought them back to the topic, maintained good eye contact, had effective prompts, and appropriate wait time.

The pilot interviews provided me with the opportunity to revise my interview questions. Based on the answers provided by pilot interview participants, some of which were repetitive, I eliminated several questions from the interview protocol. In my zeal for determining how preservice teachers' perceptions of BDS evolved in the context of a middle school teacher preparation program, I had planned to ask several questions that were remarkably similar. I weeded out the repetitive, unnecessary questions. The questions that remained got to the heart of the matter, answered my research question, and allowed me to craft the narratives. Refer to Appendix B for the interview protocol.

In narrative inquiry, voice is critical. To capture voice, each participant was interviewed three times individually and once as a member of a focus group. Each individual interview focused on gaining an understanding of the participants' perceptions of background differences, how the preservice teachers acquired knowledge of BDS, and how their perceptions evolved. The intent of the focus group interview was to allow participants to reflect on the meanings the experiences had for them (Seidman, 1998). In addition, the focus group interview occurred at the end of the study so that participants were able to reflect on their experiences and share with one another and me.

During the first individual interview, each participant and I engaged in a discussion about their understanding of BDS, her background, and the background of students taught during the first field experience. During the second interview, the participant and I engaged in a discussion about the artifacts in their preprofessional experience packet, initial application materials, and portfolio as well as discussed and clarified answers from the first interview. In addition, a

homework assignment was given. Participants were asked to write a teaching metaphor, i.e., short story about teaching, based on their experiences during their first formal field experience. In the third interview, participants clarified or expanded upon their answers from the first interview and explained their metaphors. Homework was also given during the third interview. Participants were asked to complete a Venn diagram that compared and contrasted their background with the background of the student who was the subject of their shadow study, which was completed during the EDMS 5020 field experience. In the focus group interview, participants explained their Venn diagrams, reflected on their experiences regarding BDS, and provided suggestions for program development. The following table documents the interview process and purposes.

Table 2

Interview Process

INTERVIEW	PURPOSE
ONE (February)	Discuss perceptions of BDS; share additional participant background information and background of students taught during EDMS 5020 field experience.
TWO (March)	Discuss and clarify answers from first interview; discuss artifacts in preprofessional experience packet, initial application materials, and portfolio; assign teaching metaphor homework.
THREE (March)	Clarify or expand upon answers provided during the second interview; explain metaphor; and assign Venn Diagram homework.
FOCUS GROUP (March)	Explain Venn Diagrams, reflect on experiences regarding BDS, and provide suggestions for program development

In narrative inquiry, it is important for the narrative researcher to let the participant tell the story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). It is also appropriate to have framing questions to begin the process of telling the story. Therefore, interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format. An interview guide was used to provide consistency among interviews (See Appendix B). As Patton (2002) noted, an interview guide helps make interviewing several different people

more systematic and comprehensive by defining the issues to be explored. The interview guide served as a framework that allowed me to obtain aspects of the story, but provided leeway for the stories to unfold. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim by someone with extensive transcription experience. I took field notes during the interviews.

Metaphors

In the third interview, in addition to clarification and elaboration of answers from the second interview, participants were asked to explain their metaphors for teaching. *Webster's Universal Collegiate Dictionary* (1997) defined a metaphor as “the application of a word or phrase to an object or concept it does not literally denote, suggesting comparison to that object or concept” (p. 505). By writing metaphors for teaching, participants acknowledged their roles as teachers or their interactions with students. Verbal explanation of the metaphor captured the effect that role had on their involvement with the students. For example, my metaphor is teacher as gardener. Like a gardener who cultivates and tends flowers, plants, fruits, or vegetables in the manner needed to ensure maximum growth and potential, teachers cultivate and tend to each student in their classroom, taking into account the distinguishing background characteristics of each student. A gardener knows the specific needs and characteristics of each item in the garden just like a teacher should know about the needs and characteristics of each student. Participant metaphors included Teacher as Explorer, Teacher as Sculptor, Teacher as Mother, and Teacher as Chemist. Each metaphor is described in the words of each participant in Chapter 4.

Venn Diagram

During the focus group interview, participants were asked to explain their Venn diagram (see Appendix C). In the Venn diagram, participants compared and contrasted themselves as teachers with the student who was the focus of the shadow study completed during the EDMS

5020 field experience. Identification of similarities and differences between the two groups served as additional documentation of the recognition of background difference. In addition, it displayed the participants' understanding of their own background differences.

Fieldwork Journal

Following the suggestions of Connelly and Clandinin (1990) and Merriam (1998), I kept a fieldwork journal to document my thoughts, questions, fears, ideas, and procedures used during the research process. From the beginning of the study, I documented the development of my study related to negotiation of entry, telling the stories, data analysis, and retelling the stories. In addition, the fieldwork journal provided details about data collection, comparative framework creation, and participant contact. Preservice teachers' construction of data occurred during three distinct timeframes. Table 3 indicates each timeframe for data source collection.

Table 3

Data Source Collection

Prior to Acceptance	First Semester	Second Semester
Artifacts represented during this time were created before admission to the program. Artifacts included • Preprofessional experience reflection questions • Entry essay • Resume	Artifacts created through participation in the first methods course, EDMS 5020. This section is broken into timeframes so the evolution process is evident. First month in program • Philosophy of teaching • Letter of introduction about themselves to mentor teacher • Strengths Paper Six-week field experience • Middle School Learners Chart • Shadow study • Lesson plans • Reflective journal Five weeks after field experience • Revised philosophy • Teaching strategy summary • Classroom guidance plan • Final exam • Resume	Data collected during second semester in the program. Preprofessional experience reflection follow-up questions Interviews • Three Individual--Semi-structured, open-ended interviews with each participant • Focus group Teaching Metaphors Venn Diagram

Comparative Framework

Having a comparative framework prior to data collection is appropriate in narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and served to focus my analysis specifically on what is meant by BDS. I conducted a literature search as I was conceptualizing this study and searched for an appropriate comparative framework. Sleeter and Grant (2003) designed a conceptual framework that identified five approaches to multicultural education that describe the level of interaction between teachers and students in schools. According to the authors, the level of interaction influences how teachers make choices when interacting with students of diverse backgrounds. The five approaches—teaching the exceptional and culturally different, human relations, single-group studies, multicultural education, and education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist—recognize the various types of teaching relationships formed between teachers and students. Table 4 explains each approach.

Table 4

Summary of Five Approaches to Multicultural Education

Approach	Focus
Teaching the exceptional and culturally different	When teachers use this approach, they place students into the existing social order that emphasizes Eurocentric culture. The goal is to assimilate exceptional and culturally different students into the mainstream society by building bridges between the culture of school and students and helping students adapt to the norms of the dominant culture. Deficiencies of the exceptional and culturally different students will be corrected in this process.
Human relations	When using this approach, teachers attempt to develop and foster positive relationships between students of different cultural groups. The focus is on raising students' self esteem, acknowledging and building respect for difference, and reducing prejudice. The goal is for teachers to honor the backgrounds of diverse students and encourage acceptance of all cultures; however, conflict among groups is not emphasized and critical examination of differences does not occur.

Table 4 *continued*

Approach	Focus
Multicultural education	When using this approach, teachers emphasize cultural pluralism, equal opportunity, and social equity. The focus is on social change and educational reform. Simple integration or assimilation of diverse groups into the existing social order is not enough. Curriculum focuses on the contributions or perspectives of diverse cultures and examines how inequities exist and thrive in society. The goal is to use the contributions or perspectives of diverse cultures to examine how inequities exist and thrive in society.
Education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist	When teachers use this approach, the focus is on social justice, equity, and empowerment of all students. Teachers facilitate the analysis of inequity and oppression in society and develop students' skills for social action. The goal of this approach is the reconstruction of society through the elimination of oppression, prejudice, and discrimination and development of students' skill for social action.

As comprehensive as Sleeter and Grant's (2003) five approaches to multicultural education are, they were not directly appropriate for this study because they focused on curriculum and teaching strategies, not individual teachers' knowledge of background differences and similarities. Each individual approach examined what occurs during classroom instruction. What each teacher does and how it is done was compared to the approach. The personal knowledge and perceptions of the teacher were not the focus. Teachers' knowledge about background differences and similarities might not be evident when compared to Sleeter and Grant's (2003) approaches. Therefore, I attempted to modify their approaches. The following table shows the modifications.

Once I had this modified framework I asked myself the following questions: Are the characteristics appropriate for answering my research question? Would I be able to sort data into these characteristics? The answer to both of these questions was no. The characteristics were not distinct—a lot of overlap would occur and it would be difficult to determine where data sources would belong.

Table 5

Modification of Five Approaches to Multicultural Education

Approach	Focus
Building Bridges	By making connections or building bridges between students with backgrounds different from their own, preservice teachers will develop understandings of the background differences of diverse students. The goal is preservice teacher understanding of background difference and will be evident in their preprofessional experience packet, entrance essays, philosophy of teaching, letter of introduction to mentor teacher, reflective journal, case study, follow-up questions from the preprofessional experience packet, metaphors, Venn diagrams, narrative stories, and responses to interview questions.
Honoring Backgrounds	Preservice teachers will show appreciation and foster acceptance of background difference of students. Honoring backgrounds includes thinking critically about conflicts between groups of people and encouraging the development of positive relationships between and among all students, between the students and the preservice teacher, and between the student and the school. The goal is preservice teacher appreciation and acceptance of students' background difference. This will be evident in the preservice teachers' responses to interview questions, metaphors, case study, revised philosophy of teaching, follow-up questions from the preprofessional experience packet and Venn Diagrams.
Raising Consciousness	Preservice teachers' recognizing and understanding of the background differences among students will promote social equality of all students. The goal is preservice teachers promoting equity among all students. This will be evident in their original and revised teaching philosophies, interview responses, narrative stories, and follow-up questions to the preprofessional experience packet.
Emphasizing Equity & Empowering all Students	Preservice teachers will develop a deep understanding of equity and respect for each student regardless of background differences. The goal is to provide equal opportunity for all students. This will be evident in their original and revised philosophies of teaching, narrative stories, and responses to interview questions.

I then went back to my definition of BDS. At the onset of this study, I defined background differences and similarities as those distinguishing characteristics which are a part of every person, including language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns (e.g., patterns of relocation or moving from one place to another), and familial structures (e.g., type of family to which a person belongs, such as, one-parent, two-parent, foster, blended, and nuclear).

I used these aspects to create a comparative framework for data analysis. In this framework I provide a working definition and an example of the characteristic that I might find in the data.

Table 6 provides the framework for background characteristics.

Table 6

Background Characteristic Framework

Characteristic	Definition	Example
Language	There are many different languages spoken in the United States, e.g., English, Spanish, French, Chinese, etc. and many variations of those languages exist.	In the United States, several dialects of English are spoken. The variations are commonly called accents. For example, depending on where one lives and the length of time lived there, they might speak with a southern, northern, Midwestern, or northeastern accent. In addition, the vernacular of different groups will vary.
Ethnicity	The ethnic background of a person, e.g., Asian-American, African-American, American Indian, European-American, Latino, etc. and the characteristics that define that group.	Foods, beliefs, interactions, language, or traditions that are specific to a particular ethnic group.
Socioeconomic Status	The social or economic background of a student or students' parents. This might influence the interaction between the student and his or her parents, between students at school, and influence the type of activities in which the students are involved.	Income level, belonging to a certain social group, e.g., lower, middle, upper-middle, and upper class.
Transience Patterns	Patterns of relocation—moving from one place to another.	Many people today move frequently to meet the demands of their jobs. Where parents move, so do children—which might cause students to transfer into and out of several schools.
Familial Structure	Type of family to which the student belongs.	Two parent, single parent, living with a court-appointed guardian, living in a foster home, blended family, divorced family, etc.

Once again I asked myself the following questions: Are the characteristics appropriate for answering my research question? Would I be able to sort data into these characteristics? This time the answer to both of these questions was yes. I used this framework as I analyzed each data set throughout the study. The framework was elaborated upon throughout the analysis. The final list of characteristics included language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns, familial structure, familial support, religion, gender, culture, home localities, students with disabilities, and students with varying abilities. Each of these distinguishing characteristics of backgrounds differences and similarities are described in detail in Chapter 4.

Data Analysis and Story Writing

“Qualitative analysis transforms data into findings....The challenge of qualitative analysis lies in making sense of massive amounts of data” (Patton, 2002, p. 432). I first attempted to make sense of the data by using the constant comparative data analysis method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). I read and reread data and developed codes and charts. I thought that I could sort the data into categories and compare the categories to discover themes and patterns (Merriam, 1998). I had to develop charts to document my charts. I soon got lost in the minutia of the data. It was at this point that I made the decision to engage in narrative inquiry. I wanted to tell the stories of four preservice middle school teachers—stories about their perceptions of background differences. While I spent an enormous amount of time trying to sort and categorize the data according to constant comparative analysis, this time was not wasted. As a narrative researcher, I needed to be totally familiar with the data so that I could ask clarification questions of the participants and craft the stories.

After contacting each participant by phone, e-mail, or both, I acquired each participant’s professional portfolio. In addition, I obtained each participant’s entrance essays and

preprofessional experience packet from the middle level education undergraduate advisor. Then I proceeded to make photocopies of all of the material. Prior to making the photocopies, I assigned each participant a color of paper to serve as a visual reminder of the separate data sets. I also made a white copy of the data, which was a back up in the event that I needed more color copies.

With the photocopying completed, I labeled and paginated each data source to make the analysis simpler. For example, on Jayne's Preprofessional Experience Packet, in the upper left corner, I wrote "Preprofessional Experience Packet" and in the upper right corner, I wrote "Prior To, Page 1". Labeling was consistent among data sources and participants. The labeling process did more than make analysis simpler; it afforded me the opportunity to double-check the accuracy of my copying and to become even more familiar with my data. Although a tedious process, it was one that had to be completed. I felt much more prepared when I began analyzing data because I already knew what was inside each section.

I was finally ready to begin analyzing data. As I read passages and I identified words and phrases related to distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities (e.g., *remembered, believed, opened my eyes, raised my awareness, enjoyed, need to know, experienced, affected, influenced, gained exposure, never were exposed*). To me, these words indicated three distinct levels of their perceptions. I sorted the words and phrases into three levels: awareness, acknowledgement, and action. I then created a chart for each participant and with each distinguishing characteristic according to their timeframe. These charts were essential to the writing process. Not only was I incredibly familiar with my data, I now had documentation of the participants' level of perception regarding background differences and similarities. Table 7 is an excerpt from Jayne's analysis.

Table 7

Language Chart: Jayne

Language Jayne	Awareness (conscious recognition)	Acknowledgement (professed intent to address background differences and similarities in teaching practice)	Action (address background differences and similarities in teaching practice)
Prior to Program	Language barrier; French host family did not know English, Jayne knew some French, but not enough to communicate; Hard to communicate and get across what was going on--		
Middle School Program	EPSY 2020: Field Experience--Parent called that did not speak English; Frantic; No one had a clue.		

Upon reading each piece of data and noting specific references to one of the distinguishing characteristics of background difference or similarity, I realized what a gigantic process I had undertaken. Not only did I have to read across data once, but twice, three times, and eventually more—all to ensure accuracy and consistency among my findings. I had electronic versions of the interviews and created documents that contained every reference to background difference and similarity from the participants' artifacts. I bolded and italicized their references to BDS. With data in hand, I began crafting their stories. I found that I was writing stories and analyzing their stories at the same time. According to Clandinin and Connelly (1990), writing stories and analyzing data concurrently is part of the fluid process of narrative inquiry.

As data analysis continued, I found myself completely immersed in the narrative writing process. I did not start with the past; rather I cut passages from the data and pasted them into a new document. With each new section, I asked myself, “Does this answer my research question?” and “Does this accurately represent the participant’s perceptions of BDS?” Being able to answer “Yes” to my questions, I continued. As I wrote, I asserted myself into the participants’ stories. I had listened to them, developed relationships with them, and heard them talk about BDS. In addition, I had read and analyzed their transcripts and artifacts multiple times. I knew my participants and their experiences with background differences and similarities. Through writing their stories, I gave voice to their experiences with BDS. I fashioned stories that represented the participant’s perceptions of BDS. The following is an excerpt from Jayne’s story:

While at her field experience one day, Jayne was asked if she could speak Spanish. She recalled, *One day my teacher was absent so I was waiting around in the office to see where they were going to send me and this parent called that **didn’t speak English** and they were **frantically** searching around for someone that could speak **Spanish**. They were like “Do you speak **Spanish**? Do you speak **Spanish**?” and I was like, “No” (Focus Group).* This experience helped Jayne think about the necessity of speaking a **foreign language**, especially **Spanish**. She said, ***No one had a clue*** (Focus Group).

As I was writing, I kept in mind that narrative inquiry is driven by a sense of the whole (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). In structuring each narrative, I tried to have both scene and plot. I tried to capture the place and context in which the participants lived out their stories. The details of their lives and experiences with people from backgrounds different from and similar to their own were important. The smallest of details, for example, Sarah telephoned her mother to

discuss an experience she had with the young adolescent she mentored, added vital meaning to her story. This telephone call illuminated her relationship with her mother and emphasized familial support.

In writing their narratives, I tried to capture the past, present, and future. Quite often, references to their past and future were found in the artifacts (e.g., Entrance Essay, Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher, Preprofessional Experience Reflection Questions, Revised Philosophy of Education). References to the present and the future were most often found in the interviews. Future endeavors were explained minimally; however, participants were constructing and reconstructing themselves as teachers in conjunction with their involvement in the MSP.

I tried to portray a sense of the whole—all of their experiences with BDS were important to share—especially the encounters that occurred before participants became involved in the MSP. Their experiences with people who have backgrounds different from or similar to themselves did not just begin when they were admitted to the MSP so it was important to document these experiences. Participants' past experiences might influence their current perceptions of BDS. Thus, I moved back and forth several times between data sources as various threads of stories were told. Eventually I ended up with passages that fell into a chronological order that told a story. Eventually I had narratives focusing on BDS. Each participant read, edited, and gave final approval of her story during individual member checks.

Researcher Biases

The primary instrument used in qualitative research is the researcher. The researcher conceptualizes and implements every phase of the study. All aspects of the study are filtered through that human being's worldviews, values, or perspectives (Merriam, 1998). Because of this, researcher biases must be identified prior to the beginning of the study.

I possess a passion for teaching. I plan to have a long career in higher education, which will involve working with preservice teachers, in-service teachers, and students in schools. As such, I have strong feelings about teacher education and the gulf between teachers' background characteristics and the background characteristics of students.

I believe that each person views the world in a variety of ways. Personal upbringing influences individual interaction patterns. Each individual has preferences regarding the people with whom they associate, and these preferences are often established early in life. People tend to hold beliefs about other groups of people that are sometimes biased and unquestioned; for example, I could say that if my parents believe it, so will I. Until being placed in a situation where questioning beliefs is needed, the status quo remains.

For many preservice teachers, the questioning of the status quo begins in their first experience with students who have backgrounds different from their own. I believe that preservice teachers are often minimally prepared to face differences in their future classrooms. However, when teaching an education methods course, the instructor has a massive amount of material to cover and determining the most essential can be a daunting task. For example, preservice teachers must learn to write instructional goals, objectives, and lesson plans, and they must be able to manage a class. Further, preservice teachers are encouraged to get to know their students, interact in meaningful ways, and connect with the students, but they are not often told how to do this. For some preservice teachers this might develop naturally, but for others it might not. I believe that examination of preservice teachers' perceptions of experiences with backgrounds different or similar to their own does not occur as often as it should in teacher education courses.

As a first time instructor of a middle school preservice teacher education course, I found myself extremely frustrated about the limited time I was able to devote to the exploration of background differences and similarities. The scope and sequence of the course I taught was intense. Each class session was filled with essential material and students had to learn to be prepared for a six-week field experience. Limited and fragmented segments of time were available to devote to the examination of background difference. In one sense, I believe that whatever examination of background differences and similarities occurred during my class was better than nothing. On the other hand, I feel like I did my students a grave disservice by not spending quality time examining issues related to difference. I wonder if I have become part of a perpetuating cycle that leaves most preservice teachers unprepared for the profession?

Nonetheless, I believe that all preservice teachers need to be aware (conscious recognition) of background differences and similarities. At the very least, preservice teachers ought to be able to develop a relationship with each child and discover new information about the children to reveal the children's uniqueness and use those to enhance the classroom environment. Preservice teachers should acknowledge (profess an attempt to address background differences and similarities in their teaching practice) background differences and similarities in their teaching practice. Every person has their own idiosyncrasies and often times in society, people overlook them; in classroom practice this should occur no more. Preservice teachers need to acknowledge idiosyncrasies and use them to strengthen the relationships between the teacher and students and between students as a collective. Finally, preservice teachers need to take action and actually address background differences and similarities in their teaching practice. Pretending that someone is not different, when obviously they are, only makes that person more different. No longer can preservice teachers look beyond ethnicity, socioeconomic status,

familial structure, language, or transience patterns and attempt to see the same child in the face of every student. No longer can preservice teachers set that example for students to follow.

Demographics in American society are rapidly changing, and, students in American schools are rapidly changing. Preservice teachers and practicing teachers need to develop awareness, acknowledgement, and take action so that every child in their classroom receives, at the very least, an adequate education.

To me, awareness, acknowledgement, and action occurs as a positive, linear process. As preservice teachers become aware of background differences and similarities, they are able to acknowledge these differences and similarities as they are planning their teaching practice. Further, preservice teachers will then be able to take action and incorporate BDS when teaching.

Finally, I must state my bias regarding narrative inquiry. After trying the constant-comparative data method and becoming lost in the minutia of the data, I decided I had to find another method of analysis that fit both my study and my data. I had a lot of data. Narrative inquiry was the solution. By using narrative analysis, I was able to continually interact with the data and participants as I crafted their stories. The vast amount of data I had for each participant began to make sense. By moving back and forth between data sources as I told and retold participants' stories, their voices became clear. Their stories made sense. Analysis was no longer making charts and searching for categories, it was telling and retelling, and fine-tuning so that the most concise story was told. Given the ease with which data analysis occurred after using narrative inquiry, I must admit to being partial to this method.

CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVE STORIES AND ANALYSES

The purpose of this study was to examine preservice teachers' perceptions of background differences and similarities in the context of a middle level teacher education program. In this chapter, I present narratives of each of the four participants in this study. Participants as well as any identifying information that emerged from the data (e.g., cities, counties, and schools) have been assigned pseudonyms. Each narrative is followed by an analysis. In each analysis, the participant's level of perception—awareness, acknowledgement, or action—has been identified and explained. Analyses of distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities have also been completed. It is important to note that ultimately Jayne's, Sarah's, Emma's, and Kendra's stories are told through the eyes of the researcher. In order to tell the most accurate story, participants' words have been used and are indicated by italics.

Jayne's Story

Growing Up

Born in [Mountain County], Jayne lived with her mom and dad, both of whom worked. Jayne was an *only child for seven years* until her sister, Leah, arrived (Interview #1). When Jayne was in the fifth grade, her parents separated. Jayne lived with her mother and her grandmother. According to Jayne, her maternal grandmother played a *mothering role* (Interview #1) in her life. Jayne visited her father every other weekend. Her father lived with his mother, so Jayne was able to visit her paternal grandmother as well. Jayne was relieved when her parents *finally* (Interview #1) got divorced when Jayne was in the tenth grade. And, when Jayne

was in eleventh grade, her mother remarried. During Jayne's freshman year of college, her father died of a heart attack. Family is important to Jayne—she emphatically stated, *I love my family!* (Interview #1)

When Jayne entered high school, she remembered having her first real encounter with people having backgrounds different from hers. She said,

There were a couple of nationalities in my high school classes, but not too much.

Whenever there was, it was kind of, it was a little scary; I didn't know how to react to them. I was never really exposed to people from different backgrounds. (Interview #1)

Growing up, Jayne's opportunities to interact with people who have backgrounds different from hers were limited—she said everyone

back home is like me—White, middle class and rural . . . Back in the good old country days, it was the KKK area and things like that, so the Black population is increasing and I guess the Mexican, immigrant level is increasing now, but throughout my schooling it was mainly White. (Interview #1)

Jayne participated in a French Exchange in high school. For two weeks in the fall of her junior year, a French student came to stay with her. The French student went to school with Jayne as well as on trips around Atlanta. Jayne traveled to France and stayed with the same student for two weeks in the spring. She attended a French high school and traveled around the country visiting Verdun, Paris, and Luxemburg.

Jayne believes that she learned more about people's background differences and similarities in France than she ever had at home.

In [Mountain County] it is, I mean it was all different, but in my school it was mainly middle class, White, Baptist, you know we were the same general thing. We all sit under

this little umbrella which [sic] some people would be a little bit different. When there was a Mormon, it was so amazing to talk to her and find out how different [she was], then a Jehovah's Witness, but in France it was just so much--everyone was so much completely different . . . a lot of them are Roman Catholic and their manners at the table are different, you just were exposed to so much more . . . it was just completely different, it was eye opening to see the differences between, because after you had been staying in your little bubble of [Mountain County] High School and then to be opened up to like this new world, that was kind of a culture shock. (Interview #1)

Jayne recalled being scared and wondering *what have I gotten myself into?* (Interview #1). Culture shock and the language barrier were intimidating factors for Jayne. In fact, her French host family *didn't know English and I knew some French, but not enough to really communicate, so we had this language barrier and it was just hard to get across what was going on* (Interview #1).

When asked what she learned from interacting with the French and how it affected her thinking about people who are different from her, Jayne replied,

I think it made me more open to differences. . . I had to realize that I could not do everything there that I could do at home. . . you kind of have to kind of realize it is not the same and you have to treat people differently I guess, not really differently, but you can't interact with them the same way. I gained a lot of respect for their culture and how they do things. (Interview #1)

The Middle School Program

Jayne entered The University of Georgia as a business major, but quickly changed her major to education. She wanted to be part of a *profession that helps people, and education was*

the area that first came to mind. People cannot become doctors or lawyers without teachers (Artifact: Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher). Jayne believes that *our future rests in the quality of education that is offered to our children* and she wants to *be a part of it* (Artifact: Entrance Essay).

EPSY 2020: Learning and development in education. Before entering the Middle School Program, Jayne had prerequisite courses to complete. The Educational Psychology course, EPSY 2020: Learning and Development in Education included a required one-hour per week Field Experience at a local urban elementary school. Jayne spent one hour per week at a preselected elementary school. In her first interview Jayne explained,

I had to go observe and help out in a classroom. . . it was mainly African American students in that class which was completely different from my schooling experience and it was just the way that they interacted and the way, they were very chatty, and not to say that my class wasn't chatty at all, they took kind of a "we don't really care" stance and they were in the fifth grade and couldn't answer 2x4 and it was a shock to see that students are like that, because in my elementary school, that I went to, you can ask a third grader 2x4 and the majority of the time they will get that.

While at her Field Experience one day Jayne was asked if she could speak Spanish. She recalled,

One day my teacher was absent so I was waiting around in the office to see where they were going to send me and this parent called that didn't speak English and they were frantically searching around for someone that could speak Spanish. They were like "Do you speak Spanish? Do you speak Spanish?" and I was like, "No." (Focus Group)

This experience made Jayne think about the necessity of speaking a foreign language, especially Spanish. She said, *No one had a clue* (Focus Group).

Preprofessional experience. Jayne, in a discussion of her required Preprofessional Experience, emphasized that growing up in Mountain County, there were *very few minorities*. She explained that

of course that is changing very rapidly, but when you move out to different parts of Mountain County, I live in South Mountain, when you get up to North Mountain, it is different and it is just where our county is divided. (Interview #2)

To meet the requirement of working in a setting and with people “whose backgrounds differ from one’s one” (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience Explanation Form), Jayne worked as a paraprofessional in the Exceptional Needs Extended School Year Program in her county.

Jayne *just happened to be assigned to the Autism classroom that contained a few middle school aged students* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 1). Never having been around Autistic children or nonverbal people, Jayne believes she gained a *broader range of education experiences* by being *allowed to work with students who do not typically fit in to a traditional educational setting* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 4). Jayne claimed that *the most satisfying aspect of this experience was watching the children become familiar with me.* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 5)

Nonetheless, parts of the experience were challenging. Question Number Six of the Preprofessional Experience Documentation Form (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience) asked, “What aspects of your experience did you find difficult and why.” Jayne responded, *The Autistic children needed to have a predictable routine and it was difficult to always follow their routines. Also, since many were nonverbal it was very difficult to understand what they needed.* She acknowledged that it was *difficult and very difficult* working with students different from her. Even so, Jayne chose to work in this paid position for two summers in a row. She said, *I enjoyed*

working with these students so much that I am working with them again (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 9).

Question number eight on the Preprofessional Experience Documentation Form (Artifact) asked, “What have you learned about your own interests, needs, and concerns as a result of this experience?” Jayne explained,

I have learned that I have an interest in working with students with Autism. I see a lot of opportunities to address needs of students in a General Ed. setting. I need to know more about different learning styles of students and to address them. I am concerned about how to meet the needs of individual students while covering the objectives of the class.

Jayne acknowledged that she needed to know about and how to address the different learning styles of students. Working with exceptional needs students was a practical experience for Jayne. It introduced her to a group of students with backgrounds different from her own. Jayne recognized that *the autistic kids are just so completely different from me; it kind of opened my eyes to how each classroom is going to be completely different, you are not going to have a group of kids like I grew up with.* (Interview #2)

When reflecting upon the supervisor interview related to the Preprofessional Experience, Jayne noted three main ideas she learned that would influence her as a teacher:

1. *You have to be patient and be able to empathize with feelings and circumstances. You need to care about people.*
2. *To be successful, you have to give all you have. Try to make every day a good day.*
3. *Teachers must care about kids, support the total school program, cooperate, and have a positive attitude.* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 10)

Entrance essay. Her experiences with students with disabilities helped Jayne realize that she truly had found her niche in life—teaching. In her Entrance Essay (Artifact) she wrote,

Having had the opportunity to work with middle school students in both the General Education and Special Education settings, I have realized that this is what I truly want to do with my life. . . . Middle school students need people to guide them through the decision making process so that they make decisions that will promote success in life. I want to be a part of these students' lives and help them make the right decisions.

Also in her Entrance Essay (Artifact), Jayne clarified her thoughts about the role of a teacher. She said,

It is important for educators to assist learners in understanding that gaining knowledge is a far greater goal than achieving an "A" on a report card. When educators fail to reach students of this level, then they have missed one of the greatest opportunities to shape the lives of students. Teachers have to be very dedicated to their jobs. . . I see the most important purpose of the educational system as preparing students to be successful adults, enhancing their emotional development, and assisting them in becoming life long learners.

According to Jayne,

The main goal of schools is to help students prepare for life after school. Schools need to help students understand what will be expected of them when they leave. Classes should be geared to assist students in learning and understanding skills that will be necessary to be successful in their chosen career. Schools also need to help students to develop a sense of emotional security. They must support the students to ensure that they

understand the feelings that they have and use these feelings to shape them into the individuals that they will become. (Artifact: Entrance Essay)

Philosophy of education. One of the requirements in the Middle School Program is for students to draft their Philosophy of Education. Throughout the semester, students revise their philosophies. In one of Jayne's revisions she stated, *Each student is different and it is necessary to understand these differences in order to create experiences that are beneficial to all students* (Artifact: Revised Philosophy of Education). When asked in an interview to discuss her revised Philosophy of Education, Jayne offered,

They learn differently, I mean, I was just trying to cover a whole broad range of things with that; so their learning styles are different, their backgrounds are different, their personalities are different; so you can't treat each student as the same person, you have to realize and make adjustments for who they are and their individuality . . .

(Interview #2)

Jayne identified the philosophies of teaching, both the original and revised versions, as significant factors that contributed to her overall growth as a teacher, She said, . . . *it really made me think about why do I want to be a teacher, and what do I want to do as a teacher* (Interview #2).

Field experience. When asked to describe the ways in which she interacted with young adolescents who have backgrounds different from her own, since being admitted to the program, Jayne referred to her Field Experience classroom. She responded,

There were a lot of minority students, and there was a Muslim student in the math class that I worked with. I have never ever experienced a Muslim student before and it was just interesting. . . we [Jayne and the other preservice teacher assigned as partners] were

doing a farewell breakfast for them, we brought in donuts and some little juice and you know he [the Muslim student] was like, I can't eat this and we felt so bad because we didn't even think you know there might be a student here who can't do it, because we asked if anyone has allergies and things like that, we took so much care in finding if donuts were going to be okay and then we didn't even think you know that he might not be able to eat them or whatever, so he put them in a cup and took them home and ate them after sundown. That was kind of eye opening for me because you have to make sure that you definitely know the customs so you don't mess up their religious beliefs or whatever. There were a lot of African American students which I had experience with them in my educational psychology class, but I have never really, I didn't work one-on-one with them and so this was my first opportunity to work one-on-one with them, and I don't know, I never really saw too much different between what was going on with them, then when I worked one-on-one with the White students, so I don't know, I guess the only thing really is that they [the African American students] seemed to give up a bit faster.

(Interview #1)

Shadow study. Through participation in EDMS 5020 class discussions, activities, and in the related Field Experience, Jayne learned about several aspects of young adolescents and their development. When asked to identify the class assignments that helped Jayne learn about background differences and similarities, Jayne identified the Shadow Study of a young adolescent as the most informative. She said,

To study the young adolescent, that was helpful because I was able instead of trying to take in everything at once, which I was doing, but it allowed me to focus on one student

and see how her background differences [and similarities] affected her whole education.

(Interview #2)

Before describing the student selected for her Shadow Study, Jayne provided a contextual description of the school in which her EMDS 5020 Field Experience occurred. She wrote,

Located in a rural setting, Community Elementary School contains pre-kindergarten through fifth grade classes and has approximately 504 students. There is a wide range between the socioeconomic status of the students, with some of the student population having parents who are well educated and affluent to other students who live in households where the adults are minimally educated and depend on federal subsidies to exist. Also contributing to the school's diversity, there is a rapidly increasing migrant population. (Artifact: Shadow Study)

Mary, the student who was the focus of Jayne's Shadow Study was

a Caucasian fifth grade student. . . socially confident. . . less certain of her academic ability. . . Mary's family does not seem to be very involved in her education She [Mary] indicates that her parents do not provide adequate time for her to study or assist her with assignments she finds difficult. . . Mary's family falls in the upper end of the lower socioeconomic group. Her mother is employed at International House of Pancakes, and her father works in waste management. She has an older sister, who is 12, and a younger brother, who is 7. (Artifact: Shadow Study)

When asked to talk about the differences between Mary and herself, Jayne explained that Mary was so different from me in the way that she grew up (Interview #2). Jayne explained that the seeming lack of parental support Mary received really influenced how Mary viewed school. Jayne reported that

it seemed for this girl that it was kind of like, my parents don't really care, and I mean they may have, but from speaking with her and helping her with her homework every morning, it didn't seem like they forced her to sit down and actually study. (Interview #2)

When she talked about Mary's interest in school, Jayne compared herself and her family to Mary and Mary's family. Recalling her experiences in school, Jayne explained, *My mom, if I ever didn't do my homework, I got lectured and grounded and stuff like that, so she really forced me to do stuff* (Interview #2). Jayne always knew she was going to attend college.

In a discussion about her Venn diagram, Jayne summarized the differences between Mary and herself. She said,

I am from a divorced family and she has two parents, a two-parent family, and I only have one sister, and she has a brother and a sister. I am from a middle class socioeconomic status and she is from lower and I had a lot of family support growing up and she seems to have less of her family support. She is very social most of the time. We are both female and White and attended public schools, and both lived close to the school. (Focus Group)

Jayne, in the Focus Group Interview, said she wanted to add, *We are both Americans*, to her Venn diagram. Jayne now realizes that young adolescents can have a variety of home lives.

Learning about Mary and her family *opened my eyes* (Interview #2).

Jayne explained that she had been thinking about students' background differences and similarities a lot more

especially with this class [EDMS 5020] with doing the Shadow Study and working with students that had different backgrounds than me. . . I have realized how important it is to consider the background differences [and similarities] and realize that not everyone is

going to learn the same way and things like that. I think I just had this classroom envisioned as everyone just sitting there and all learning exactly the same and I don't think it is going to be like that at all. That perfect little classroom. . . (Interview #2)

Second semester. During the second semester of the Middle School Program, students may or may not have exposure to young adolescents. When asked what types of interactions she was having with young adolescents who have backgrounds different from hers in her second semester of the program, Jayne responded, *The only way really is because my mom is a teacher, she teaches the moderately disabled class, the MOID class, and so I go and I hang out with her class on Fridays and Mondays sometimes (Interview #1).* Jayne described the MOID students as *mainly White, there are two African American, I think they are about to get a third one though (Interview #1).*

Looking to the future. Looking ahead to the rest of her preservice teacher education, Jayne admits to being

a little scared of the inner city group. I think I can handle pretty much everyone else, but the big kids, I don't know if I can handle them very well. I mean I would probably do fine in that situation and could figure it out, but that is one area that, it is not just the inner city, but it is more those mean kids I guess, what do you call them, I just remember walking around my high school and there were some really big mean kids and that just kind of scares me and I don't know if I can handle working with them. But I think I feel comfortable working with anyone else. I am sure that I would eventually become comfortable working with them too after I have been exposed to them. I haven't had much exposure. (Interview #2)

Jayne identified *Whites* [pause], *Caucasians*, *African Americans*, and *perhaps special education* populations as the students with which she has had the most exposure (Interview #2).

View of herself as a teacher. Throughout the Middle School Program, there were many opportunities for students to reflect on and write about their roles as a teacher. Jayne discussed her role as a teacher in a Reflective Journal piece. She said,

As a teacher, I need to work with the students and prepare them to make informed and mature decisions while trying to fit in with their peers. I want to provide them with support and guidance so that they might not make decisions that they will later regret.

(Artifact: Reflective Journal)

In another assignment she wrote,

When planning my instruction, I must take the differences among my students into consideration and use them as the basis of my instruction. For example, I can use the cultural differences in my classroom to teach students about different cultures. (Artifact:

Classroom Guidance Plan)

Jayne believes that *students are not responsive to teachers who view themselves as superior* (Artifact: Strengths Paper). In addition, Jayne feels *that it is important for teachers to take the time to get to know their students and make accommodations to ensure that the student functions at their highest level* (Artifact: Reflective Journal). She said that she learned that *teachers need to provide students with a positive learning environment to ensure student learning* (Artifact: What I Learned Final Examination) and that *teachers need to discover and respond to the differences of individual students* (Artifact: Classroom Guidance Plan). In another assignment she wrote, *in order to provide students with meaningful experiences, teachers must take the time to know each individual student* (Artifact: Revised Philosophy of Education). She

explained, *with becoming more familiar with my students' backgrounds and preferences, I will be able to interact more successfully with each one and provide guidance and assistance when needed* (Artifact: Shadow Study). And finally, Jayne sees her role as a teacher as that of an explorer. For her metaphor she wrote,

My metaphor is teacher as an explorer. An explorer seeks after and explores unknown or little known regions. Sometimes they do this in hopes of discovering something that will better human lives. Just as an explorer seeks ways to improve lives, teachers seek and explore ways to better their students' lives. Teachers seek and explore activities or lessons that will engage students and provide them with knowledge that will support them and help them lead a successful life. They must also explore their students' backgrounds and likes and dislikes to discover their individualities, such as learning styles and personalities. Exploring individualities can help teachers discover activities that will be relevant and purposeful for the students. (Teaching Metaphor)

When asked about background differences and similarities. When asked if she realized that background differences and similarities of students would influence her teaching practice, Jayne admitted that before EDMS 5020 and participating in this project, she did not. She explained,

I don't think I thought too much about it [background differences and similarities] to begin with, it wasn't like a major concern of mine going into education. I was worried about how I am going to run the classroom and things like that, I wasn't like "Oh, there are going to be so many different students I have to work with and cultural differences and background differences." And so really it kind of opened my eyes and I realized that I do have to pay attention to that sort of thing. . . I really didn't, you know, you always

think about the White, the Hispanic, you never think of single family or single parent, you know, stepparent, you never really think about that and how that really affects the students. So you know, I just realize that it goes beyond the color of skin. (Interview #2).

During the final meeting, the Focus Group Interview, with Jayne, she was asked “What do background differences and similarities mean to you?” She responded,

It is more than just the color of your skin and the place that you were born. It gets further into it. Like with your family, whether you have two parents or just one parent. Your religion, just how different things play into the way that you are.

Analysis of Jayne’s Narrative

Jayne’s perceptions of background differences and similarities centered around ethnicity, familial structure, familial support, socioeconomic status, language, religion, home locality, culture, students with disabilities, students with varying abilities, gender, and transience patterns. Jayne’s words are in italics.

Ethnicity

Of all the distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities (e.g., familial structure, language, socioeconomic status) identified in this study, Jayne referenced ethnicity the most. Jayne’s perception of ethnicity was focused on both awareness (conscious recognition) and acknowledgement (professed intent to address background differences and similarities in teaching practice). Jayne was aware of ethnicity both in her schooling years and while in the Middle School Program.

Jayne, a *White* female, grew up in a *mainly White* area of her state. Jayne’s recollection of her *exposure* to people other than White did not begin until her high school years. Exposure to people of a different ethnicity than hers was limited—*only a couple of nationalities that she was*

aware of and mostly Black. Jayne perceived it to be a little scary and did not know how to react. When she was in high school the numbers of minority students increased, mostly due to Mexicans, immigrant level.

Jayne's awareness of ethnicities other than *White, Black, and Mexican* increased through her participation in a French exchange program. A *French* girl lived with her for two weeks and Jayne traveled to France for two weeks. She described this experience with a person from a different background than hers as *eye opening*.

Jayne's awareness level regarding background differences and similarities increased as a result of her experiences in the Middle School Program. She interacted with more *African Americans* and *Mexicans*. In the Field Experience associated with her Educational Psychology class, there were *mainly African American* students. This experience was *completely different* for Jayne than what she had experienced in her own schooling. The students' *backgrounds are different* from her own. In her EDMS 5020 Field Experience, she was once again exposed to a class with *a lot of minority students, mostly African American*. For her Shadow Study, Jayne focused on Mary, a *Caucasian* student.

When reflecting on her experiences in the Middle School Program, Jayne identified *Whites (pause) Caucasians, and African Americans* as the students with whom she had the most exposure. According to Jayne, her experiences in the program *kind of opened her eyes*. Jayne acknowledged that *she had to pay attention to that sort of thing (ethnicity)* and she *can't treat each student as the same person*. She acknowledged that she must *become more familiar with my students' backgrounds and preferences*. In addition, Jayne acknowledged that when she plans her instruction, she *must take the differences among students* into consideration and she must *explore their backgrounds*. Jayne's awareness level of background differences and similarities has

increased to look beyond *the White, the Hispanic*. She acknowledged that *it just goes beyond the color of skin*. All of these statements indicate that Jayne has professed intent to address background differences and similarities in her teaching practice.

Familial Structure

In this study, familial structure refers to the type of family to which a person belongs, such as, one-parent, two-parent, foster, blended, and divorced. Initially, Jayne's perception of familial structure was primarily that of awareness. However, after being in the Middle School Program, Jayne did acknowledge how familial structure influences students.

Jayne's familial structure encompassed *one younger sister* and *divorced and remarried* parents. Jayne recalled her being an *only child* and was *aware* that her life had changed when her sister was born. Her biological father *died* during Jayne's first year of college. In addition to her *mother* and *father* playing active roles in her life, Jayne had *close relationships* with her grandmothers—her maternal grandmother in particular. Jayne described her as having a *mothering role* in her life.

On the other hand, Mary, the focus of Jayne's Shadow Study, had a familial structure *different* than Jayne's familial structure. In her Venn diagram, Jayne indicated that she and Mary had different familial structures, *I am from a divorced family, and she has two parents, a two-parent family. I only have one sister and she has a brother and a sister*. Finally, Jayne acknowledged that familial structure affects students. She admitted to *never* being aware of the *single family, or single parent, step-parent* and how that *affects* the students—having *two parents or just one*.

Familial Support

Familial support, as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities, refers to the ways (e.g., motivating, encouraging, assisting) in which various members of a family are either positively or negatively involved in each other's lives. Jayne's perception of familial support was at the awareness level (conscious recognition). Jayne's awareness begins with her admission of growing up in a *supportive* family.

Jayne is now aware that her level of familial support is not necessarily the norm—not everyone *has the same family support at home*. According to Jayne, her mother *forced* her to do *stuff* (e.g., homework, schoolwork) and Jayne knew if she did not complete her work, she would be *lectured* and *grounded*. Jayne *always knew* she had to do *well* in school because she was *going to college*.

Jayne's perceptions of Mary's family were *very different* from her own. According to Jayne, Mary *grew up with parent's that don't really care*. Jayne based this decision on speaking with Mary and having to *help her with her homework every morning*. Jayne indicated that Mary's parents *do not provide adequate time for her to study or assist her with assignments*.

In her Venn diagram, Jayne displayed her awareness of the differences of familial support between herself and Mary—I *had a lot of family support growing up, and she seems to have less of her family's support*. Mary's *seeming lack of parental support, kind of opened Jayne's eyes*.

Socioeconomic Status

In this study, varying levels of socioeconomic status are distinguishing characteristics of every person. Jayne's perception of socioeconomic status occurred at the awareness level. Jayne was aware of socioeconomic status in both her schooling years and upon entering the Middle School Program. *Middle class* is the socioeconomic level into which Jayne places herself, both of

her parents' worked. According to Jayne, the majority of people in her high school were *mainly middle class* as well.

When completing the Shadow Study assignment for EDMS 5020, Jayne provided contextual information of her Field Experience school. In it, she was aware of the *wide ranging* socioeconomic status of the students. Some parents were *well-educated and affluent* or *minimally educated and dependent on federal subsidies to exist*. Jayne was also aware of Mary's, her Shadow Study student, socioeconomic status, which was the *upper end of the lower socioeconomic group*. In her Venn diagram, Jayne explained *I am from a middle class socioeconomic status and she is from lower*.

Language

In this study, the language spoken by a person serves as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Jayne was aware of language both during her schooling years and once she entered the Middle School Program. Jayne perceived language at the awareness level. Jayne's first experience with languages other than English arose when she participated in a French Exchange Program in high school. Jayne was aware of the *language barrier* and it was *intimidating*. The host family *did not speak English* and Jayne knew *some French*—not enough to *really communicate*. Jayne recalled that she found it *hard* to communicate and *get across what was going on*.

Frantic was the word Jayne used to describe the actions of the office staff where she completed her Field Experience associated with her Educational Psychology. Jayne was aware that communication with a *parent that didn't speak English* could not occur because no one could *speak Spanish*. When she reflected upon the experience, Jayne stated, *No one had a clue*.

Religion

Jayne's perceptions of background differences and similarities included the identification of religious groups to which people belonged. Jayne was aware of people's religious affiliation in both her schooling years as well as after being admitted to the Middle School Program. Jayne identified herself as *Baptist*—as were the majority of people with whom she grew up. In high school, Jayne became aware of different religions. Jayne was *amazed* at *how different* the *Mormon* was from her own background. After the *Mormon*, Jayne encountered a *Jehovah's Witness*. During her participation in the French Exchange in high school, Jayne learned that many of the French are *Roman Catholic*. She was aware that the French were *completely different* from her.

Since being in the Middle School Program, Jayne has knowingly encountered one person from a different religion—a *Muslim* student was in Jayne's EDMS 5020 Field Experience class. Jayne had *never ever* interacted with a *Muslim student* and it was *just interesting*. Upon reflection, Jayne described the experience as *eye opening*. During the farewell breakfast, Jayne *felt so bad* because she *didn't even think* that there would be someone who *can't do* it. Through this experience, Jayne acknowledged that she has to *make sure* that she *knows* the religious customs of her students so she does not *mess up* their religion. In this statement, Jayne professed an intent to address religion in her teaching practice.

Home Localities

Home localities, a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities, describe the type of community in which people live. For the purposes of this study, home localities include urban, suburban, or rural home settings. Jayne was aware of home localities both during her schooling years and in the Middle School Program. Jayne identified her

home locality in [South Mountain County] as *rural*. Similar to Jayne, Mary's, Jayne's Shadow Study student, home locality was *rural*.

Anticipating her future as a teacher, Jayne remarked that she was *a little scared* of the *inner city* (i.e., urban) students. Jayne's awareness of the differences between her home locality and those of the students she may teach indicates that she recognizes the challenges she may face in the future, she wonders whether she *can handle* working with urban students. She is aware of not having *had much exposure*.

Culture

As a distinguishing characteristic of the background differences and similarities, culture refers to the range of behaviors, attitudes, customs, beliefs, and interactions of people. Jayne's perception of culture was mainly at the awareness level as she grew up. Jayne's first awareness of culture occurred when she described her home as being a *KKK area*. Jayne's first true experience with a culture different from hers took place during her participation in the French Exchange. Jayne was aware of feelings of *culture shock* when she traveled to France—*everyone was so much completely different*. Even their *manners at the table* were different. Jayne was aware that the behavior she displayed in France had to be different than when she was at home; it *was not the same*. Through interacting with the French, Jayne was *opened up to like this new world*. Jayne admitted to gaining *a lot of respect* for French culture and *the way they do things*.

In the Middle School Program, Jayne's awareness of culture centered around the attitudes and behaviors of students in her Field Experiences—both in EPSY 2020 and in EDMS 5020. With regard to the students in the EPSY 2020 Field Experience, most of whom were *different* from Jayne, she was aware of being *shocked by just the way they interacted* and the “*we really*

don't care" attitude students displayed. In her EDMS 5020 Field Experience, Jayne noticed that the African American students *seemed to give up faster* than White students.

Jayne acknowledged culture just once during this study. During her second semester in the Middle School Program, Jayne indicated that she plans to use the *cultural differences* of students in her classroom to teach about *different cultures*. By making this statement, Jayne professed an intent to address background differences and similarities in her teaching practice.

Students with Disabilities

Included in Jayne's perceptions of background differences and similarities were students with disabilities. In this study, students with disabilities are students who have been officially identified as learning disabled and receive special services to meet their educational needs. Jayne's perception of students with disabilities only occurred twice in the Middle School Program.

Jayne encountered students with disabilities when completing her required Preprofessional Experience. Jayne worked in the [Mountain County] *Exceptional Needs Extended School Year Program*. Jayne gained experience with *nonverbal*, *Autistic* students. Even though it was *very difficult* to work with the *Autistic* students and *difficult to always follow their routine*, Jayne *enjoyed* herself.

Sometimes, Jayne continues to interact with *special education* students by *hanging out* in her mother's classroom. These students are *moderately disabled*, *MOID*. Upon reflection, Jayne believes she gained a *broader range* of educational experiences by working with *students who do not typically fit* in general education classrooms. Jayne admits to having had a lot of exposure to the *special education populations*.

Students with Varying Abilities

In this study, another distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities identified by Jayne were students with varying abilities. Jayne's perceptions of students with varying abilities only occurred during her participation in the Middle School Program. Jayne displayed both awareness and acknowledgement levels of perception.

Through the completion of several assignments in the Middle School Program and specifically in EDMS 5020, Jayne became aware that *each student is different* and that she would need to *consider the backgrounds and differences among students to create experiences beneficial to all students*.

Jayne acknowledged that student *learning styles, backgrounds, and personalities are different*. This acknowledgement of the varying abilities of students has made Jayne aware of the fact that she will have to *make adjustments* for student *individuality*. Jayne knows that *not everyone will learn the same way*. Also, Jayne acknowledged that she will be able to *interact more successfully* with each student by *becoming familiar* with her students' *backgrounds and preferences*, and she will be able to *provide guidance and assistance* when needed. In these statements, Jayne has professed her intent to incorporate the needs of students with varying abilities into her teaching practice.

Transience Patterns

In this study, transience patterns refer to the patterns of relocation or moving from one place to another. Jayne's perception of transience patterns occurred only at the awareness level. Jayne was aware of transience patterns both before entering the Middle School Program and after. Jayne was *born* in [Mountain County], has spent the majority of her life there, and her

family still lives there. According to Jayne, the *immigrant level* is increasing in [Mountain County].

After being in the Middle School Program, Jayne displayed her awareness of transience patterns by describing her EDMS 5020 Field Experience school as having a *rapidly increasing migrant population*. In addition, Jayne was aware that both she and Mary, her Shadow Study student, *lived close to the schools* they attended.

Gender

The gender of a student serves as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Jayne's perception of gender only occurred after being in the Middle School Program. Jayne was aware of the Muslim boy in her EDMS 5020 Field Experience class. Jayne was aware that Mary, her Shadow Study student was female. And, in her Venn diagram, Jayne explained that both she and Mary are female.

Conclusion

Ethnicity, familial structure, familial support, socioeconomic status, language, religion, home localities, culture, students with disabilities, students with varying abilities, transience patterns, and gender were distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities identified by Jayne. Jayne's experiences with each of these distinguishing characteristics influenced her perceptions of background differences and similarities. As Jayne's level of interaction increased and she acquired more knowledge through the Middle School Program, Jayne's awareness and acknowledgement level of background differences and similarities also increased.

Sarah's Story

Growing Up

A family of educators surrounded Sarah as she grew up . . . *her mother, and grandmothers were all educators and her grandfather was superintendent of the school system that I would later attend* (Artifacts: Entrance Essay and Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher). She believes

the role that they played in my life influenced me at a very young age. From them, I learned many things about teaching, such as, their hard work ethics and the things that each of them contributed to the school system (Artifact: Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher).

Even though her grandfather and grandmothers had retired by the time, Sarah entered school, she recalled

the stories that I have heard from them, as well as those that others told me were sufficient enough for me to recognize the value of a teachers' job and the effect that educators can have on their students' lives. (Artifact: Entrance Essay)

Thus, *all of my life I have wanted to be a teacher*, Sarah stated (Artifact: Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher).

Being from an *established family* with strong ties to the local community, Sarah completed all of her public schooling in the *same school that my mother worked in* (Interview #1). When asked if she attended elementary, middle, and high school in the same district, Sarah replied, *Yes, all three the same. I grew up in the same place. . . . Same house. Same everything.* (Interview #1).

Sarah's parents have been *married forever*—her *father* is an independent pharmacist, her *mother* is a teacher, she has an *older sister* who just got married, and a *younger brother* (Interview #1). All three children have attended or are attending college. Sarah said she is from a *middle class family background* (Interview #1). Sarah's *grandparents* lived very close. . . . *they lived right up the hill from me and then my other grandparents, they lived far away. My grandmother moved when my granddad died, so she lived up the other hill from me* (Interview #1). As Sarah reminisced about her parents, she said,

My dad was really into sports and stuff, so he always took my brother to baseball games and did all those kinds of sports things with him. My mom did more of the girly stuff with us, like shopping and Girl Scouts and things like that. But, my dad tried to get us [the girls] into sports . . . (Interview #1)

Sarah's family *went to church every Sunday. I was required* (Interview #1). She described her religious affiliation as *Episcopalian* (Interview #1). When talking about her family Sarah smiled widely and admitted, *I have a supportive family, I have been blessed with that* (Interview #1).

Sarah's parents reside in her hometown of [Spring], *Georgia*. [Spring] is *a small, but growing town, east of Atlanta* (Artifact: Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher). Sarah described [Spring] *as rural, but it is getting to be more urban because Atlanta is moving into it* (Interview #1).

Sarah described the ethnicity of students in her high school as *probably 80% White, and the other 20% was probably, mostly Black*. [There were] *not very many other ethnic groups* (Interview #1). Sarah was a *cheerleader . . . played tennis . . . and was in [the] Junior Civitan Club*. She also participated in the *Outdoor Club* (Interview #1). Sarah said the other students

who participated in these activities were *probably like me*, with the exception of the other cheerleaders, they were *probably 50-50* [White and Black] (Interview #1).

The Middle School Program

Knowing from a young age that she wanted to be a teacher, Sarah entered The University of Georgia as an education major. However, Sarah came to the University of Georgia not knowing anyone else who would be attending this university. As a freshman, she joined a sorority. Sarah explained that it would be *a good way to meet people* (Interview #1). Sarah admitted that she has had *little interaction*—academically or socially—with *people different* from her since coming to the university.

Preprofessional experience. To complete the required Preprofessional Experience, Sarah engaged in two separate activities. She was both a tutor and a mentor. Sarah tutored *below grade level students most* [of] *whom were minorities and from underprivileged homes* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 2). She tutored fourth and fifth grade students at a local urban elementary school.

Most of them were African Americans I would say. I had a few Hispanic children. But I didn't have any White students and so just working with those students every single day you know taught me a lot about diversity, I guess, I don't know. (Interview #2)

When discussing the tutoring and mentoring in which she had been involved, Sarah referred to herself as *very fortunate* (Interview #2). According to Sarah,

I had a lot more things than they [students] had and stability, I guess, a home, a family environment. You know I was raised with two parents in the home. Most of them weren't. I have had everything that I have ever needed and wanted and you know, most of them,

have not. Some of them didn't even have, like food to eat and it was just really sad.

(Interview #2)

Although the tutoring was *pretty much just academic work* (Interview #1), Sarah was *able to talk with the students about their feelings and be a friend to them, as well as help them with their studies* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 2).

In addition to tutoring, Sarah participated in a mentoring program. She mentored a *little kindergarten girl who was very poor and she is [a] little Black girl and so that really, that really let me see like first hand the differences in background, because I would go to her house and pick her up and it was just really sad.* (Interview #1)

Sarah mentored this girl for one year so she was able to develop a strong relationship with her.

Sarah, in her first interview, described her relationship with the mentored girl,

Well, I would go see her at school. First of all, we were required to go once a week, but you go more and help with homework, read to her, play on the playground with her, eat lunch with her, and kind of just be a friend to her I guess. I would take her places sometimes out of school, like I took her to dinner one night, or she could come to my house and we would watch a movie, and I took her and her sister skating one day and she loved that. She like doing stuff like that because she didn't get to do many things like that.

In addition, Sarah provided a description of the girl's family:

She lived with her mother only and her mother was, I think was just a couple of years older than me. It was kind of difficult because I didn't know if I was supposed to call her by her last name, you know, Mrs. Whatever or just by her first name, so because she was just a few years older than me and I picked up on a few things from the girl, I heard the mom wasn't there much, like when I would take the girl home, she would say, "Can I

come to your house? My mom is going to play cards tonight.” And stuff like that, so I could tell that her mom just wasn’t there, and I think that her mom’s boyfriend might have been there a lot because she said something about the man sitting on her couch a lot, so I had a feeling that is who that was, and she had a lot of other brothers and sisters living in the same place, but was [were] from a different man, so . . . (Interview #1)

Sarah added, *It just broke my heart that she didn’t even want to go home (Interview #2).* She recalled, *I went home and called my mom and I was like “Mom, it is so sad” and she is a teacher and she is like “Oh, that stuff happens all the time” and I was like “Oh my gosh . . . ” (Interview #2).*

Sarah was personally invested in her mentored students’ life and often felt *sadness* when reflecting on her mentored student’s home life. In addition, Sarah became connected to the students she tutored, Sarah

found it difficult to keep the relationship strictly at school. For instance, many students wanted me to take them to the movies, come to their birthday parties, and other things; however, I was unable to and I felt that I was letting them down when I could not. It was [during] tutoring, when a child told me that she did not get a birthday cake for her birthday, I immediately wanted to go and buy her one. However, I had to understand that it was not my job to help them financially, but instructionally. (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 6)

Sarah acknowledged that *through the [mentoring] program, I have been able to understand the significance of a teachers’ role as a counselor and a friend to their students (Artifact: Entrance Essay).* Sarah learned. . . *you are not just a teacher, you are so many other things to those*

students. . . you are sometimes, you can be their parents, and sometimes you can be their friends, and you have so many different jobs really (Interview #2).

Question Number Seven on the Preprofessional Experience Documentation Form (Artifact) asked, “How has your understanding of young adolescents, families, and communities changed as a result of this experience?” Sarah answered,

It has changed in that I now realize how hard it is for teachers to help students who are below grade level during class. Because teachers are constantly teacher [teaching] new material, it is difficult to help those students who do need extra help. It is important to realize that all students learn and [at] different rates and it is important to help them to be successful regardless of their speed of learning new material.

When answering Question Number Eight, “What have you learned about your own interests, needs, and concerns as a result of this experience?” from the Preprofessional Experience Documentation Form (Artifact), Sarah replied,

I learned that I am interested in becoming a counselor from being a tutor and mentor to the students. I enjoyed talking to the students about the feelings and emotions they had, whether their feelings are nervous about a test or sad because of a new baby at home. I found it interesting to see the students put their trust in me and want to be my friend.

Sarah’s supervisor explained to her that . . . *above all care and concern for the children are the most important things to have when working with children.* The supervisor informed Sarah that *being a good listener and loving children are necessary.* Sarah explained, *My supervisor really focused on teaching the children to believe in themselves. She said that you can educate the children and help them so much, but that they must believe that they are worthwhile and they can achieve anything they choose (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question Ten).*

When asked about the Preprofessional Experience during the Focus Group Interview (Artifact), Sarah agreed with another participant, Emma, about the influence the Preprofessional Experience had on their perceptions of background differences and similarities. Emma said,

I was a little more scared before the Preprofessional Experience about background differences [and similarities]. And then when I immersed myself in it, I realized this is fun. And I was okay when I was doing it. I was just afraid to encounter anything different than my background. After that, I realized it was fun.

Sarah added,

I was kind of the same way she was. . . . I worked one-on-one with one student and so I had to go to her house and pick her up and so I got to see really, I guess, more intimately how different her background differences [and similarities] were very different from mine. And so the first time I had to go to her house, I was terrified, I made a friend go with me, it kind of opened my eyes and the second and third time I was fine going by myself.

Sarah would recommend it [the Preprofessional Experience] to anyone who enjoys working with children, and especially anyone who is interested in becoming an educator (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 9).

EPSY 2020: Learning and development in education. Before actually beginning her Middle School course work, Sarah had prerequisite courses to complete. In her EPSY 2020: Learning and Development in Education, Sarah engaged in an *outreach program* (Focus Group). *She [the instructor] wanted us to do something to help out the community, she provided some options and we got to choose what to do, we had to write a paper at the end* (Focus Group Follow-up Conversation).

Being familiar with the mentoring program, Sarah decided to be a mentor to a student again. The mentoring program only lasted six weeks so Sarah was unable to establish a strong relationship with her mentee. This time, Sarah's mentee was *a black girl in second grade* (Focus Group Follow-up Conversation). Sarah said that *the girl was from a low-income family, but her parents gave her money to spend whenever I would take her places* (Focus Group Follow-up Conversation). Sarah recalled that *this girl wasn't as clingy or dependent on me as the other one* [mentee from the Professional Experience] *and she was more stable, she had two-parents at home* (Focus Group Follow-up Conversation). Sarah was *not as scared to go to her house* (Focus Group Follow-up Conversation).

Entrance essay. Because Sarah's childhood was *spent being the first child at school as well as the last one to leave as I waited on my mother to finish her daily obligations . . .* she learned early in life that *a . . . teacher's job is not an easy one, but the results are far more rewarding than the obstacles* (Artifact: Entrance Essay). Sarah decided that she wanted to be a middle level teacher:

I feel that the middle school years are a critical part of a child's education and development. The grades are important because they lay the foundation for the student's future success. Also, students are going through many changes in the middle school years that are important for middle school teachers to understand. The students are able to take on more responsibilities than they did in elementary school and it is important for teachers to allow them to do this, but not to give the students too many responsibilities that they are unable to handle. Middle school years are significant as students learn more about themselves as well as being exposed to more rigorous academic material than elementary school. (Artifact: Entrance Essay)

Sarah needs to help them [young adolescents] in some way because I have been blessed with such a supportive background and I feel like it is also my responsibility to do something to improve their lives (Interview #1). Sarah remembered nights filled with stories of the school day, homework, and an early bedtime to anticipate the next school morning (Artifact: Entrance Essay). She recalled,

Growing up, my family raised me with the belief that getting an education was not only important, but necessary in order to be successful. . . . Supposedly any grades that I made were acceptable as long as I had tried my best, yet it was also assumed that “my best” meant I was to challenge myself to the limit. This value that my parents placed on education was driven in to me at a young age and is still apparent to me as I continue my education. (Artifact: Entrance Essay)

Philosophy of education. Teacher educators in the Middle School Program feel that it is beneficial for preservice teachers to write their Philosophy of Education. This writing generally occurs at the beginning of the first Middle School methods course, EDMS 5020, and then is revised throughout the semester. In her Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher (Artifact), Sarah shared her beginning Philosophy of Education: *My beginning philosophy of teaching is simply to help each student reach his or her full potential.*

Upon completion of the EDMS 5020 Field Experience, Sarah revised her Philosophy of Education. The revised version was expanded greatly:

My beginning philosophy of teaching is simply to help each student reach his or her full potential. I want students to not only learn the required curriculum, but to also develop positive and significant relationships with me, as their teacher, as well as with their classmates. I want to establish a good rapport with my students, and hope that each child

feels comfortable being in my classroom. I plan to form an encouraging and upbeat climate in my classroom, where every child is able to learn, regardless of his or her ability level. I want every child to understand their uniqueness and realize that they have strengths and weaknesses. I plan to help each student to work to overcome their weak spots and continue to strengthen their good qualities. I want each student to respect themselves, other classmates, and me as a teacher. I hope that as a teacher, I can impact and influence the student's lives in order to better prepare them for their future. (Artifact: Revised Philosophy of Education)

Sarah admitted that it was *interesting to see* how her Philosophy of Education had changed (Interview #2).

Field experience. When explaining her interactions with young adolescents from backgrounds different from her own, Sarah discussed her EDMS 5020 Field Experience class. She prefaced her description of the students' distinguishing characteristics with an explanation of their behavior:

Well, I was, my mentor teacher said I was there for the best two periods of the day, so they were well behaved. . . . I would say that they [the students] were probably 60% Black and 40% White, and there were, I happened to have 3 Hispanic students. They were very well behaved and they were all really smart. (Interview #1)

Upon reflection of the socioeconomic status and language spoken by students, Sarah clarified,

I would say they were probably middle- to lower class. Languages, there were, I had three Spanish speaking students and one of them was totally bilingual and the other two were somewhat. . . . Oh, I had one child from the Philippines, I forgot to mention him, and he was bilingual also, but there was more of a language barrier between [him and

the remainder of the class] *as opposed to the Spanish speaking child who was bilingual.*

(Interview #1)

Sarah explained that the Filipino boy had more of a *culture barrier than a language barrier* and *it was just hard for him to communicate* (Interview #1).

In sharing her thoughts about the differences between herself and the students in her Field Experience class, Sarah said

Well, I feel like I probably came from a higher socioeconomic status than they did, than most of them did. Language [was not that different] because most of them spoke English, I mean a few of them didn't in the class that I was in. Background [pause], I guess there were more Black people in this school than attended my school. . . . I was surprised, most of them did come from two-parent homes. (Interview #1)

In her Reflective Journal (Artifact), Sarah wrote about a “foreign” incident. She described what took place during the first time teaching in the Field Experience class.

I was teaching and I used the word foreign and a student did not know what it meant. . . . I had no idea that seventh graders would not know what foreign meant. As I started to explain, another student cuts in and says “X (another student) is foreign, he comes from Mexico.” I didn't want the student to feel that he was different and I suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable. I stepped back and took a deep breath. I then said the foreign that I was referring to was more like unfamiliar, but people sometimes refer to other countries as being foreign because they are unfamiliar to them. (Artifact: Reflective Journal)

Sarah *didn't know what to do because I didn't want him to think that he was different from any other students in the classroom* (Interview #2). Sarah was so *embarrassed because I didn't want this student to feel uncomfortable* (Interview #2). He did feel uncomfortable, though. Sarah said,

First, he looked kind of shocked and then he kind of looked down on his desk and didn't say anything. . . . He was a bright student and he talked in class a lot. . . he was so interactive with all the other kids instead of being withdrawn . . . he was always very talkative and just the fact that he put his head down on his desk and I felt so bad for him. (Interview #2)

Shadow study. During the EDMS 5020 semester, Sarah learned a lot about young adolescents and their development. Several course assignments *forced* (Interview #1), Sarah to examine young adolescent development. Sarah identified the Shadow Study of a young adolescent as most helpful, . . . *it helped me more with [understanding] the diversity between the students and myself* (Interview #1).

Sarah provided a description of the school in which her Field Experience occurred. She wrote:

[Henry Middle School] is located in [Cloud County] in the city of [Apple, Georgia]. According to the Census, in [Cloud County], approximately 65 percent of the residents are White and 28 percent are Black. Hispanics, make up about 7 percent of the county's population. [Henry Middle School] is located on the Eastside of [Cloud County], and has an enrollment of approximately 675 students in grades 6-8 and 49 teachers. (Artifact: Shadow Study)

John, the focus of Sarah's Shadow Study was

. . . a male student who is in the seventh grade at [Henry Middle School]. He is originally from the Philippines and his native language in Filipino. He has lived in the United States for about seven years and speaks English reasonably well. . . . He has two brothers that he does not like because he says they are mean to him, and he lives with both his mother and father. (Artifact: Shadow Study)

In addition, Sarah said

because of his background and heritage, he is an extremely interesting student. . . . He enjoys participating in [in] class discussions, and especially likes to talk about his heritage. He gets excited when he can share things with the class from his past experiences. For example, when discussing volcanoes, he [was] eager to tell the class about his experience with an eruption of Mt. Pinatubo, which is located in the Philippines. .He is not in a gifted program, but does very well in school, especially since English is his second language. (Artifact: Shadow Study)

Sarah noted that she felt *connected* to John and that he was lacking other connections in school.

Sarah explained,

I don't think he had many friends in school. And I think that is another reason I got to be close with him, because he was comfortable talking to me and I guess I was a younger teacher figure or whatever, and I definitely think he didn't have any friends in school. I don't know that much about his home and family. We didn't talk a lot about his family. . . I think that he probably had a supportive home. I feel like he did. He always has his homework, and if he didn't have it, I think it was probably his fault. He just didn't do it . . . (Interview #1)

In a discussion of her Venn diagram, Sarah explained the similarities and differences between herself and John. She said,

I found that I had more differences than I had similarities with mine. First, I say that he was born in the Philippines and I was born in the United States, obviously. He immigrated to the United States when he was seven years old and I have lived here my whole life. He is bilingual, he speaks English and Filipino, and I only speak English. He is [has been] educated in both America and the Philippines and I was not. I am from a middle class family background and he is from a lower class family background. It was really hard for me to come up with similarities. We were both from two parent households. We are both friendly and social, but he is very friendly and he would talk to you one-on-one, but in a whole class setting, he didn't talk much at all. But one-on-one, he was really friendly. (Focus Group)

During the Focus Group Interview Sarah realized that she forgot about brothers and sisters. Both she and John have siblings.

Sarah acknowledge that *I learned many things about myself, and what it takes to be a middle school teacher* by completing the Shadow Study (Artifact: Shadow Study). She elaborated,

First, I learned that students are far more concerned with approval from their peers than they are with approval from the teacher. . . . I feel that I will struggle to be a positive role model on [for] my students, because they will be much more concerned with each other than they will be with me. I question my ability to influence and impact the lives of my students, when they do not look at me for support or approval. . . . The experience taught me that you must constantly stay on your toes, be aware of the classroom surroundings,

and be prepared. I learned that students at this age need to know they are loved and cared for, they need to know that they are worthwhile and important, and most of all, they need a positive role model in their lives. For some of the students, a teacher is the only positive influence that they have in their lives, which illustrates the importance of being a truly effective and successful teacher. (Artifact: Shadow Study)

Second semester. In the second semester of the Middle School Program, a Field Experience or interaction with young adolescents is not required. When asked how she was interacting with young adolescents with backgrounds different from hers in the second semester of the program, Sarah referenced ESCI 4440: Methods of Teaching Science in Middle Schools.

In this course, she has a community service requirement. The course instructor provided a list of community volunteer activities in which the students could participate or the students could find their own experience. However, the activity had to be completed with *people different from us* [the students] (Focus Group Follow-up Conversation). Sarah is *tutoring Hispanic children at the* [their] *trailer park* (Interview #1). Sarah learned that a local Catholic Church organized this tutoring opportunity.

Looking to the future. Looking ahead to her future as a teacher, Sarah admitted to wanting to have a positive influence on her students. She explained that she wants to *reach every child*. Attempting to clarify, she added

When a student leaves my classroom, I want them to remember me, the teacher, and for me to have had some influence on their lives. I remember the first day of our EDMS class, she [the instructor] read us a story about a teacher and a student and he wrote his teacher letters and was telling her about his life and when he graduated from medical

school and I just thought that was so touching and just to be able to have that kind of impact on one child's life, I think that is amazing. (Interview #2)

Sarah believes that *teaching is a gratifying and fulfilling job as you can see the way you have influenced student lives, as well as actually watching the progress that they have made* (Artifact: Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher).

View of herself as a teacher. Over the course of the EDMS 5020 semester, students were provided opportunities to examine their feelings about teaching and their role as a teacher. In her Strengths Paper (Artifact), Sarah identified the primary quality that she possesses that she feels will make her a good teacher, *I am a good listener. I enjoy listening to other people's problems, feelings, and solutions. I think that I am not only a good listener, but that people feel comfortable talking to me.*

In her Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher, Sarah explained that she *will treat all of the students equally and will look for the good qualities in every child and I will be a good listener and will always respect each child. . . . I will be patient with the students and make them feel that they can trust and respect me* (Artifact: Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher).

In another assignment, Sarah acknowledged that *as a teacher, I will have to be creative in coming up with lesson plans that use a variety of resources and it is important to understand the differences among students . . .* (Artifact: Reflective Journal). Sarah realizes that she will be a role model for her students *as a teacher, realizing that I [might] make mistakes and that it is [will be] okay will help my students to learn that it is also okay for them to make mistakes* (Artifact: Strengths Paper). She believes that *as a teacher it is necessary to develop a wide range of strengths, as you are working to compliment the many different personalities that come from*

working with many students in one classroom (Artifact: Strengths Paper). And finally, Sarah sees her role of teacher as that of a sculptor. In her teaching metaphor, she wrote,

I think that a teacher is a like a sculptor who uses her knowledge and love in order to shape and mold her students. She provides love and support for her students as well as establishing the environment in which students are able to learn. Just as a sculptor would use creativity and design to produce a statue of clay, a teacher uses her creative talents to mold effective lesson plans and allow the students to learn. The students are not only able to learn from the teacher, but they also admire her and display the same values that she has molded. A teacher is like a sculptor because she has the ability to transform the mind of a child, just as a sculptor changes the clay into a beautiful piece of art. I think that a teacher is like a sculptor because she molds the personalities and minds of each of her students just like the sculptor molds and creates statues. (Teaching Metaphor)

When asked about background differences and similarities. When discussing the background differences and similarities of young adolescents, Sarah said what surprised her most was

the language thing, because I don't know what I would do if [as] a teacher [if] some of the students in my classes didn't speak our language. I feel like I would have a personal responsibility for it [to teach those students], but it would be so difficult. . . . that really bothers me because I feel like those students, you know, deserve an education too, but they are obviously not going to get it if I don't speak it [their language] and I am not able to speak their language and communicate with them. . . . I really want to know how to speak Spanish, but I can't stay in school forever. (Interview #1)

Sarah knows that *every child has the ability to learn and Each student is different and will learn in different ways and will respond to teachers in different ways* (Artifact: What I Learned Final Examination). Sarah believes that it is *really important* to have experiences with students who have backgrounds different from hers because *those are the students I am going to be teaching and if we [preservice teachers] don't have experience with them, we are going to be, you know, cold* (Interview #1). Sarah has learned that

you have to establish some relationship with all of your students. . . . They have to respect you and enjoy your classroom. . . . if they see that you are passionate as a teacher, they will be more apt to want to learn and to want to be in your classroom.
(Interview #1)

In addition, Sarah believes that

being from a different background doesn't influence your learning style, but I think that students who aren't from a secure and stable background have a more difficult time being organized and being on task, because they never had that organizational structure in their lives in general, so I think it is harder for them. (Interview #2)

With regard to background differences and similarities, Sarah feels that *everybody comes from a different place . . .* (Interview #2). She does admit to becoming more aware of background differences and similarities,

I have just become more aware that there are so many background differences [and similarities] out there. You know, when I first came to school and thought I wanted to be a teacher, I pictured this perfect little classroom and me being the teacher and everything going smoothly and I have realized that it is not like that at all. It takes a really good teacher to establish that kind of environment . . . (Interview #2)

During the final focus group meeting, Sarah stated that background differences and similarities is *just pretty much everything from your past that has an effect on you and who you are today*. She identified *family* as *the big* influence on people (Focus Group). Also, Sarah admitted that background differences and similarities *wasn't [sic] anything that was in my head until I got in the Program* (Focus Group). She added,

doing the Preprofessional experience and the Field Experience, and I guess the whole program I, it [perceptions of background differences and similarities] has [have] become strengthened, I guess. I have become more aware of it and I actually pay attention to. . . I actually think about it. . . I am just more aware.

When asked “In what ways are your perceptions of background differences and similarities important to you as a preservice teacher?” Sarah responded,

I think it is just important to get to know the students, don't make a judgment just based on looking at this child. Like you can't tell anything about a child's personality just by looking at them. (Focus Group)

Analysis of Sarah's Narrative

Sarah's perceptions of background differences and similarities focused on familial structure and familial support primarily. Sarah acknowledged ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, home locality, language, students with varying abilities, gender, transience patterns, and culture. As in the narrative, Sarah's words are shown in italics.

Familial Structure

In this study, familial structure refers to the type of family to which a person belongs, such as, one-parent, two-parent, foster, blended, and divorced. Sarah's perception of familial structure was primarily that of awareness (conscious recognition). She *grew up surrounded* by an

established family. Her familial structure encompassed a mother and father— married *forever*, an older sister and brother-in-law, a younger brother, and grandparents.

Sarah's awareness of differences and similarities in familial structure increased during her participation in the Middle School Program. Sarah contrasted her own experience of having an established two-parent family with some of the students with which she came in contact. For example, as part of her required Preprofessional Experience, Sarah mentored a young girl. According to Sarah, the girl's familial structure encompassed a young mother, the mother's boyfriend, and several brothers and sisters from *different* fathers--a familial structure quite different than her own. Sarah also tutored other students during a portion of her Preprofessional Experience. With these students she again noted a difference. Sarah said she *was raised in a two-parent home and they* [students she tutored] *weren't*.

As part of the EPSY 2020 course, Sarah mentored another girl. She noted that this girl was not as clingy or dependent on her as the first girl she had mentored. Sarah speculated that this was due to differences in familial structure--the independent girl was from a *two-parent stable home*, while the *dependent* girl had a *young mother* and several siblings.

John, the focus of Sarah's Shadow Study, had a *different* familial structure from the first girl she mentored. John's familial structure included a mother, father, and two older brothers. In Sarah's Venn diagram, she indicated she and John were similar in their familial structure as they both had a mother and a father and siblings.

Sarah also became aware of the similarities in familial structure of her cohort of EDMS 5020 Field Experience students. Sarah's reaction to her awareness was interesting. She said she *was surprised* when she learned that most of her cohort came from *two-parent homes*, just as she did.

Sarah acknowledged familial structure only once during the study. During her second semester as a student in the Middle School Program, she said, *You are not just a teacher, you are so many other things too. . . a parent.* In this statement, she professed an intent to address familial structure in her teaching practice.

Familial Support

In this study, familial support refers to the ways (e.g., motivating, encouraging, assisting) in which various members of a family are either positively or negatively involved. Sarah's perception of familial support occurred simply at the awareness level (conscious recognition) before entering the Middle School Program. Sarah described herself as *very fortunate*. Sarah is now aware that *growing up*, she had *stability, a home, and a family environment*—which is very different from some of the students with which she interacted. Reflecting on her childhood, Sarah's awareness of her family's *influence* on her has increased. It was through her family that she became aware of the value of education.

Through participation in the Middle School Program, Sarah became increasingly aware of the background differences and similarities regarding familial support that abound in schools. During her required Preprofessional Experience, Sarah would pick the mentored girl up at her home. Sarah admitted to being *terrified* to go to the student's house. The girl's mother was a young mother who was *not there a lot*. Sarah's mentee did not want to be at her home and would frequently ask Sarah if she could go home with her. According to Sarah, this interaction raised her awareness—*it kind of opened my eyes*—Sarah *got to see* in a *more intimate* way the differences in family support that existed between herself and the mentored girl.

John, the focus of Sarah's Shadow Study, had a *supportive home environment*, in Sarah's opinion. Sarah believed that this was something they had in common, although they did not discuss his family much.

Having her awareness level increased has made her feel a *responsibility* for the young adolescents with whom she interacts. Sarah *needs to improve* the lives of young adolescents because of having been *blessed* with a *supportive background*. Sarah acknowledged that sometimes the best thing she can do is to learn to *just be a friend*. In addition, Sarah identified *family* as a *big influence* on students' lives. To her, students who *aren't from a secure and stable environment* have a more difficult time in school; they lack *structure*. Sarah now acknowledged that *everyone comes from a different place*. These professed intents to address familial support in her teaching practice ought to make Sarah a better teacher of students who do not have supportive homes.

Ethnicity

The ethnicity of a person serves as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. In this study, Sarah was aware of ethnicity both during her schooling years and in the Middle School Program. Sarah's perception of ethnicity occurred at both the awareness and acknowledgement levels. Sarah identified the students in her high school as *eighty percent White* and *twenty percent Black*. She was not aware of *very many other ethnic groups*. Sarah participated in several extracurricular activities, she described her colleagues as *probably like me*, with the exception of the cheerleaders who were *probably fifty-fifty*, White and Black. As a White female, Sarah had limited exposure to people from different ethnic groups throughout her schooling years.

Since being in the Middle School Program, Sarah's awareness had increased. Her exposure to *African American* and *Hispanic* young adolescents has increased. All of the students Sarah tutored during her Preprofessional Experience were *minorities*; they were *African American* and *Hispanic*, but not *White*. Both of the girls Sarah mentored, for her Preprofessional Experience and ESPY 2020: Learning and Development in Education project, were *Black*. The students in Sarah's EDMS 5020 Field Experience were *sixty percent Black* and *forty percent White*, and there *happened* to be *three Hispanic students* and one *Filipino* boy in the classroom. Sarah was aware of there being *more Black* people in her Field Experience school than in the schools she attended growing up. Also, Sarah documented the demographics of the county in which her Field Experience took place. She noted, *sixty-five percent of the residents are White and twenty-eight percent are Black. Hispanics make up about seven percent of the counties population.*

Sarah's awareness of ethnicity continues to develop in the second semester of the Middle School Program. She is involved activities with *people different* from her. Her ESCI 4440: Methods of Teaching Science course has a *requirement* that students complete a community service. Sarah is tutoring *Hispanic children* at their trailer park.

Sarah acknowledged ethnicity only once during the second semester of the Middle School Program. Using her experiences with *people different* from her as her foundation, Sarah acknowledged that *you can't tell anything about a child's personality by just looking at them* and *it is important* to get to know *each student*. By making these statements, Sarah professed an intent to address ethnicity in her teaching practice.

Socioeconomic Status

Another distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities is socioeconomic status. In this study, Sarah was aware of her own socioeconomic status as well as that of the students with whom she worked in the Middle School Program. Sarah identified herself as being from a *middle class family background*. Both of Sarah's parents work outside the home and both she and her siblings have attended college. Sarah became aware that she had *a lot more things, everything I have ever wanted or needed* and the students she encountered in the Middle School Program did not.

The students Sarah worked with when completing her Preprofessional Experience requirements were from *underprivileged homes* and were *very poor*. When tutoring she became aware that some of the students *didn't even have food to eat*—a big difference from her childhood. For her EPSY 2020 Field Experience, Sarah mentored a second-grade student. Sarah was aware that the girl came from a *low-income family*. Sarah was surprised when the girl's parents *gave her money to spend* when Sarah took her places. When comparing herself to the students from her EDMS 5020 Field Experience Sarah was aware of the fact that she *probably* came from a *higher socioeconomic status* than the students. When comparing herself to John, her Shadow Study student specifically, Sarah was aware of the difference in socioeconomic levels—she is from a *middle class family background* and John is from a *lower class family background*.

In this study, Sarah only acknowledged socioeconomic status one time—during her first semester in the Middle School Program. She acknowledged that she was tutoring to help the students *instructionally* not *financially*—Sarah wanted to try to meet the financial needs of the students, but had to realize it was not her duty to do so. By addressing the purpose of her role,

Sarah's perception of her role changed. In making this statement, Sarah professed an intent to address socioeconomic status in her teaching practice.

Religion

A person's religious affiliation may contribute to the background differences and similarities among people. Sarah's perception of religion was at the awareness (conscious recognition) level. She defined her religion as *Episcopalian*. She was *required* to attend church every Sunday while growing up. She was unaware of the religious affiliation of any of the students with whom she interacted while in the Middle School Program. However, Sarah was aware that a *Catholic Church* organized the ESCI 4440 tutoring program for Hispanic children in which she is participating.

Home Localities

The home locality to which one ascribes may serve as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Whether rural, suburban, or urban, home localities identify the type of environment, one is from. Sarah's perception of home localities was simply awareness (conscious recognition). She was aware of her home locality. Sarah identified her hometown of [Spring], Georgia, as *small* and *rural*, but becoming *urban* due to the growth of the city of Atlanta. During her participation in the Middle School Program, Sarah was aware that her EDMS 5020 Field Experience school took place in an urban setting.

Language

In this study, the language a person speaks serves as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Sarah's perception of language was influenced by her participation in the Middle School Program—she became aware of language only after having participated in her EDMS 5020 Field Experience. During this Field Experience, Sarah had her

first encounter with *bilingual* students. She had a *bilingual Hispanic* student and a *bilingual Filipino* student in her class. In addition, Sarah interacted with two other *Hispanic* students that were *somewhat bilingual*. John, the student focus of Sarah's Shadow Study, *spoke English reasonably well*; his *native language was Filipino*. When sharing her Venn diagram, Sarah displayed her awareness of their language differences by admitting, *he is bilingual, he speaks English and Filipino, and I only speak English*.

Since being in the Middle School Program, Sarah has realized the impact *the language thing* has on teaching and establishing relationships with students. She is aware that she is unprepared to teach students who do not *speak our language*. Also, Sarah is aware that she will be responsible for the learning of all her students; she feels a *personal responsibility* to teach all children, but wonders how she will do this when she does not speak another language. Sarah wishes she had learned to speak *Spanish*, she is *really bothered* because she does not feel prepared to *communicate* with or teach all students. She is aware that *those students deserve an education, too*.

Students with Varying Abilities

For the purposes of this study, students' varying ability levels are distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities. Sarah only became aware of the varying ability levels of students after being in the Middle School Program. To complete the Preprofessional Experience requirements, Sarah tutored *below grade level* students. Through tutoring, Sarah became aware of the difficulty a teacher faces when trying to *help below grade level students* within the confines of a regular class period. Sarah is now aware that it is *important to realize* that *all* students learn at *different rates* and students need to be *successful* regardless of their *speed of learning*.

Through various activities and experiences, she has had while in the Middle School Program, Sarah acknowledged that *every child has the ability to learn* and that *each student is different and will learn in different ways*. Sarah *plans to form an encouraging and upbeat climate in my class where every student is able to learn, regardless of his or her ability level*. Sarah has professed an intent to address students with varying abilities in her teaching practice.

Culture

In this study, culture refers to the range of behaviors, attitudes, customs, beliefs, and interactions of people. Sarah's perception of culture was not evident until she completed her Shadow Study and EDMS 5020 Field Experience, during her participation in the EDMS 5020 class. Sarah was only aware (conscious recognition) of John's, her Shadow Study student, culture. According to Sarah, John had a cultural barrier—having spent his early years in the Philippines, he experienced some difficulty when interacting with American students. However, John *especially liked* to talk about his own *heritage* and would *get excited* when he would be able to share things from his *past*.

In the very first lesson Sarah taught in her EDMS 5020 Field Experience, she used the word *foreign* in the lesson and anticipated no problems. However, one student in the class did not understand the meaning of the word. Another student offered an example, explaining that *X (another student) is foreign, he comes from Mexico*. Mortified, Sarah had to explain that her intended use of the word meant *unfamiliar*, even though some people use the word *foreign* to refer to people from other countries because those people are unfamiliar to them. Through this experience, Sarah became aware of the various levels of cultural understanding that existed in her class. In addition, Sarah's awareness of culturally different students increased. She was mortified by the experience and worked diligently to ensure that *X* was not *uncomfortable*.

Transience Patterns

In this study, transience patterns (e.g., patterns of relocation or moving from one place to another) served as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Sarah's perception of transience patterns was simply that of awareness (conscious recognition). During her participation in the Middle School Program, Sarah revealed her awareness of her own transience patterns; she was aware of the fact that she lived in the *same house* all of her life and attended school in the *same district*. When explaining her Venn diagram that compared and contrasted her background with John's background (Shadow Study student), Sarah was aware that John was born in the Philippines and she was born in the United States.

Gender

For the purposes of this study, gender served as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Sarah only perceived gender at the awareness (conscious recognition) level. During her participation in the Middle School Program, Sarah identified the gender of the students with whom she worked. She was aware that she tutored two female students and that John, the focus of her Shadow study, was male.

Sarah identified several distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities that effected her thinking about teaching and students; familial structure, familial support, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, home locality, language, students with varying abilities, culture, transience patterns, and gender. Sarah's perceptions of background differences and similarities were strengthened as she gained more knowledge and experience through her participation in the Middle School Program.

Emma's Story

Growing Up

Before entering kindergarten, Emma had lived in New Jersey and in Washington State. However, when she entered school, Emma and her family were settled in [Athlete] Georgia. Emma lived in a . . . *fairly, wealthy primarily White middle to upper class neighborhood* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience Follow-up Question 3) all through her schooling years. Emma recalled *always* having *extremely well educated teachers* even though she *kept getting moved around from school to school* (Interview #1). As a suburb of Atlanta, [Athlete] was a growing community—Emma attended two different elementary and middle schools, but only attended one high school. Briefly, Emma mentioned that students in her schools were *just White*—of the 2,000 students, *maybe 50 were Black* (Interview #1).

Emma's older sister and her *two wonderful parents* are a close knit family (Artifact: Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher). Emma's father made *his way up the corporate ladder* (Interview #1)—he works as a *Vice President* at [an environmental company]. Her mother is a housewife *even though she has no kids at home. . . . My mom is [my] best friend, she is just the most amazing woman I have ever met, she is just always there for me. . . she will drop anything. . . for me* (Interview #1). Emma's older sister, *the complete opposite of me* (Interview #1) graduated from The University of Georgia two years ago with a degree in Finance. Emma believes that her *parents have instilled strong morals and values in me, and I am lucky that I was able to grow up in such a loving environment* (Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher).

Emma recalled that *everybody [in her family] became involved in church later in our lives. I was raised Catholic* (Interview #1). Now, her family attends and is involved in a non-denominational church in [Athlete]. [Friendship] Church is *huge; it has like 12,000 members*

(Interview #1). Emma teaches Sunday school, sings at a Bible Study, and is a volunteer at her church. Emma explained that

I have always been a very happy person in general, but when I found my strength in the Lord, I just, I completely look at things differently. . . I realized my duty on this earth is to help other people and that is a lot of the reason I decided to become a teacher. . . I just know God is leading my path and every other path that I attempted to take just wasn't working out and I would get bad grades, which I don't get bad grades. . . I tried the business route, I tried the dietetics route. . . my dad actually tried to sway me not to be a teacher, money reasons, but then I was like you know what, that is what I want to do.

(Interview #1)

Emma clarified, *Although I am a strong Christian, I never impose my beliefs on anyone and respect people for their beliefs also* (Artifact: Strengths Paper). When asked to describe the role religion plays in her life, she said

It just encompasses my whole life; like I was telling my mom this, everything I do is related to what I think, how I should live, and I feel like God is leading my life in everything I do and I trust Him, even like when I was in Spain [Spring Break vacation] and those bombings [happened] I just knew that, I know that God is in control of my life and that no matter what happens, I trust Him always. In relationships and everything, where I am going to teach eventually, I know each opportunity will come from Him. It just encompasses my whole life. Like I am never, I just let Him lead my life and I don't live dangerously or carelessly. I really, I try to live in a good way that would be satisfying to the Lord. (Interview #2)

The Middle School Program

With dreams of being a teacher, Emma entered The University of Georgia. However, her father was concerned about the average salary of a teacher and convinced Emma to try out other fields. Emma realized that the other professions were not for her and by her sophomore year, Emma had declared Middle School Education as her major. Emma was finally on a career path that would enable her to *fulfill my dream* (Artifact: Entrance Essay).

EPSY 2020: Learning and development in education. Needing to complete the prerequisite courses, Emma enrolled in EPSY 2020: Learning and Development in Education. Little did she know that she would be required to engage in activities with students from different backgrounds. Emma chose to tutor an African American boy. She made minimal reference to the experience, except to say that *taught me a lot about how he learned and how he like struggled a lot* (Focus Group).

Preprofessional experience. Emma completed her required Preprofessional Experience in two different settings. She worked as a counselor at a Christian Summer Camp for girls and as a teacher assistant and tutor at a local urban elementary school. In both of these settings, Emma interacted with young adolescents with backgrounds different from her own.

As a camp counselor, Emma *endured one of the hardest summers ever. At the same time, it was the best summer of my life.* Emma lived at the camp for nine weeks and *was in charge of children 24 hours a day.* She

was given the opportunity to lead two cabins of fifth and sixth graders over a two-month period. In addition to teaching them aerobics, crafts, ropes, and swimming, the counselors were expected to teach them about God. I learned an incredible amount about how to teach and how to help the girls strive to be all that they could be. The girls taught

me that every one is unique; every girl was completely different in her views and her way of learning. For some girls, it was easy for them to read the Bible; and for others, it was better for me to read it to them. (Artifact: Entrance Essay)

Emma noted that

Through this experience, I learned to be a mother and a teacher at the same time. . . . We [the camp counselors] were paid \$1250 for nine weeks. It really was not the money that was my reward; it was the memories and experiences with children that will be in my heart forever. These children are God's special gift; I love teaching them, nurturing them, and loving them. (Preprofessional Experience, Self-Reflection Form A)

Emma had to *step out of my comfort zone in the beginning* of tutoring and teaching assistant experience; *The school, [Flower Elementary] is primarily a minority school* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Self-Reflection Form). She volunteered to tutor two students who had learning disabilities and to serve as a teaching assistant. She spent about four hours each week with serving in these roles.

According to Emma, the school in which she was a teaching assistant and tutor was *completely different* than the schools she attended growing up—*The school was primarily a minority school. I went to schools that primarily taught White children. This was such a great experience. I learned so much about life in general and how to teach these children* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 3). In addition, she learned about *issues of race, poverty, and special education* and Emma learned that *we have to ensure that children's health issues need to be addressed before teaching them about their studies. (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 2).*

Emma stated that she

found so much satisfaction in the improvement of the children's attitudes and grades. I realized that I was making a difference in the children's lives and that meant so much to me. I enjoyed watching the students grow in their studies and in their own lives. (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 5)

Another important lesson Emma learned during the Preprofessional Experience was when she was a tutor to two children with learning disabilities. She explained, *Teaching children with learning disabilities is very trying on a teacher. It is difficult to have to watch a child struggle with their spelling words and multiplication tables* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 6).

By engaging in the Preprofessional Experiences, Emma

realized that my passion is children. Through all of my experiences, I was able to work with children from different cultures and races. I was able to decide that I wanted to educate children for the rest of my life because of my time spent with the children. As a counselor, I was able to teach children while encouraging and taking care of them. I choose a Christian camp because I think I would like to teach at a Christian school so I can teach the children about God, too. (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 1)

When asked to explain what other insights or thoughts about this experience she would like to share, Emma said, *I am so glad that I did both of these experiences. They both taught me a considerable amount about children and how their differences are a way for them to be individuals* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 9). Emma's understandings of young adolescents, families, and communities did not necessarily change as a result to her experiences,

but she did develop a deeper *love and passion* for children. She realized that . . . *they* [children] *are the light in a world of darkness. Their hearts are so open and playful; they are always ready for anything. Teaching children will be the most rewarding career, in my opinion* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 7).

Entrance essay. In her Entrance Essay (Artifact) Emma stated, *I get a thrill even at the thought of teaching middle school students; I want the opportunity to change lives* (Artifact: Entrance Essay). Through her experiences, Emma had learned . . . *Every child has the right to learn and . . . teachers need to be sensitive to the fact that every student learns in a unique way* (Artifact: Entrance Essay). She is

very passionate about becoming a middle school teacher because I feel that students in this age range are in the most important developmental stage. These students are at the age where they are struggling to figure out who they are right now and who they want to be in the future. (Artifact: Entrance Essay)

Emma recognizes that teachers

can have so much impact on their students' lives. I want to be the teacher that will do anything for her students; my desire is to be known as a teacher that cares about and loves her students with all of her heart. I look forward to teaching them about life in addition to teaching them about their studies. I want them to know that the decisions that they make now will impact their lives in the future. I will stress the importance of education, and I will focus on instilling study habits in my students to help them be successful in every class that they step foot in for years to come. (Artifact: Entrance Essay)

Emma explained her beliefs about the reasons for schooling:

In my opinion, there are many important reasons that children need to go to school. These children have the potential to be inventors, leaders, and entrepreneurs, and they will be, most importantly, the future of our country. We [teachers] need to have confidence that these students will be able to go out into the world and be able to make a living for themselves. . . . We [teachers] need to educate our children to be able to do anything that they want to do and help them know that there is nothing that cannot be achieved with a little effort. After students go through school, they need to be able to graduate and say to themselves, "I can be anything that I want to be." (Artifact: Entrance Essay)

Emma has very strong feelings about what she believes middle school children deserve.

These [middle school] children deserve the best, and nothing else should be tolerated. Students need to know that their teacher is serious and determined to help them succeed in life. These children [middle school] need teachers that will be passionate about their job and who are willing to work diligently every day to see that their students' goals are met. . . . Children need stability in their lives; without it, they become immune to the rules and do not know what it feels like to be loved. (Artifact: Entrance Essay)

Philosophy of education. In the first EDMS methods course, students write their Philosophy of Education. During the course of the semester, students are given the opportunity to revise their philosophy, often knowledge acquisition, and experiences in the class cause students to rethink their original position.

Emma did not change much of her beginning Philosophy of Education. Rather, she expanded upon it. Her Revised Philosophy of Education (Artifact) is

To teach is to touch a life forever. I want to ensure that I know each and every student. Each child is unique and has varying defining characteristics. A teacher's sole responsibility is to determine the strengths and weaknesses of every student and allow each student to learn and succeed according to his/her own needs. I will ensure that I focus on every student as an individual and incorporate each child's interests into my teaching. Students want to be loved and known; I will be committed to giving my students the time they expect, the effort they require, and the love that they desire. Only through doing this will every child achieve success in my classroom and beyond.

When asked to explain the *achieve success* element of her Philosophy, Emma acknowledged that success will be different for every student, and she wants

them to feel like they accomplished something in my class and that they feel like after leaving my classroom they have learned and I feel like I want them to feel like they are a better person, and [have] better self-esteem, and feel like they really learned. I don't mean that they have to get [a] 100 on everything at all, just learn the material to the best of their ability. (Interview #2)

Field experience. When asked about the ways in which she was interacting with young adolescents with backgrounds different from her own, since being admitted to the Middle School Program, Emma mentioned her Field Experience school from her EDMS 5020 class. She explained, *During my Field Experience, I worked with lower to middle class children of various races. The kids were from such loving families, but I could tell it was completely different from where I grew up.* (Preprofessional Experience Follow-up Question 3). Providing a thorough description of her Field Experience school, Emma wrote,

Creek Lake Elementary School is known for the excellence of its administrators, teachers, parents, and students. The school is a K-5 rural school with approximately 430 students of diverse backgrounds. Of the 430 students, approximately 85% are White, 5% are Asian, 4% are Black, and 2% are multi-racial. The majority of this school is White lower to middle class children. Two hundred thirty-six students are male, and 194 students are female. At Creek Lake, 5% receive gifted education, 11.4% receive special education, and 28.8% receive a personalized IEP. About one fifth (18.2%) of the students qualify for free/reduced lunch. The teachers are primarily female. (Artifact: Shadow Study)

The students in her class, however, were majority White (Interview #1). Emma's mentor teacher would *always have me help whoever needed help . . . it wasn't necessarily a particular ethnic group . . .* (Interview #1).

Shadow study. During the EDMS 5020 Field Experience, students were asked to focus on one particular young adolescent and learn about this student's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical characteristics. Emma selected Adam. She wrote,

Adam, a fifth grade boy at Creek Lake, is a great example of someone who really gets involved in activities. Adam is a small-framed child with blond hair and blue eyes. He is a Caucasian English-speaking child who has grown up in the same county his whole life. His parents have been married for fourteen years, and he has an older sister and a younger brother. Adam is a middle class boy who attends class every day; he appears to be a little messy looking every day with his shaggy hair and wrinkled clothes, but he is always clean and ready to learn! (Artifact: Shadow Study)

According to Emma, Adam is *... a teacher's dream!* (Artifact: Shadow Study). Emma continued to describe Adam as

. . . one of the sweetest boys one would ever want to meet; he never gets into trouble for being disruptive or rude. He really cares about the feelings of others and is very sensitive to students and teachers. Adam sits in the back of the room and is observant of everything going on around him as he learns and works. He learns best by working with others and by being able to share his opinions and thoughts with students and teachers. He likes people to be involved in his learning. . . . He is always willing to help someone in need. . . . He appears to never have a bad day because he is always able to look at the bright side of things. . . . Whenever Adam tells a joke or tells a story, he is able to laugh at himself. . . . He has a positive self-esteem and is able to just kick back and have a good time!

(Artifact: Shadow Study)

During the Focus Group Interview, Emma shared her Venn diagram which compared her background to Adam's background. She wrote,

First, I just talked about the class that we are in, which I am in the middle-upper class and my student was in the lower-middle class and the SES I am high and he is middle. I, as a student, was very shy and never asked for help. On the other hand, he is always willing to ask for help and is very outgoing. I had a lot of friends, he didn't have many friends, because a lot of them thought he was weird and he is very creative and then in the middle, our similarities; we both enjoy attention, we are both European nationality, Caucasians, we both went to school with primarily Caucasians, we both have upbeat personalities, always do our best, we both feel upset when our work is not complete, and we both enjoy school.

In the group discussion of Venn diagrams, Emma stated, *I found that I focused on the really admirable characteristics. He always asked for help, [was] outgoing, he was willing to talk; I just thought he was precious, I really enjoyed him.*

From the entire EDMS 5020 Field Experience, Emma believes that she is *exactly where I want to be* (Artifact: Shadow Study). In her opinion, teaching . . . *really is a dream job. . . . Teachers have the opportunity to change children's lives* (Artifact: Shadow Study).

Second semester. In the second semester of the Middle School Program, students are not required to be involved in activities with young adolescents. Emma stated that it is *odd that we* [preservice teachers] *do it* [engage in experiences with young adolescents] *one semester and then we take off* [the next semester] *and then we do it for an entire year. . . . We need all of the teacher preparation we can get!* (Interview #2)

Emma summed up her second semester interactions with young adolescents who have backgrounds different from hers in one word, *subbing* (Interview #1). Emma is a substitute teacher in [Bear County]. Emma explained that she has subbed in schools that she would have been uncomfortable going into, before entering the Middle School Program. Emma believes that *all preservice teachers need to substitute. I think that just putting yourself in a situation where you are going into a classroom blind with just the teacher's, the one teacher's direction, is an amazing experience. Like I am so comfortable now and I am not going to feel uncomfortable in the fall when I go back into the classroom just because I am in so many different classrooms all the time. . .* (Interview #1)

Emma clarified, *I have initiative to do this, but I don't think that everyone will do it. . .* (Focus Group).

Looking to the future. As Emma looks to the future, she recognizes that I HAVE to know my students' interests and lives in order to be the best teacher I can be. I have to know what is going on in their lives before I can teach them to my best ability. I need to incorporate student interests into my daily teaching for their maximum success (Artifact: What I Learned Final Examination).

In her Strengths Paper (Artifact), Emma documented that she has learned that *Every student learns differently from his/her peers, and every teacher needs to ensure that various methods are used to help their students achieve maximum potential* (Artifact: Strengths Paper).

When discussing lesson planning (Focus Group), Emma admitted that *I need to be more careful about background differences [and similarities] . . . one [of her lessons] was about September 11th and connecting September 11th and Pearl Harbor and if I had even thought about background differences [and similarities], you know, if I had a Muslim child in my classroom, I told them to write down three emotions they felt and he [the possible student] might have said I thought about hate and the way people treated them hatefully in the United States and then the other one [lesson plan] I had was about WEB Dubois, and I actually read The Souls of Black Folk, and if we had a racism discussion, like you know about what racism is and you know all that, and how it could have just brought up just all kinds of crazy things in the classrooms. Going through these interviews has taught me that I need to be very careful in planning. . . . I think what happened to me is I think of very controversial issues that I could talk about and I don't think about what implications could happen in the classroom. So it made me realize like, I need to be very careful.*

In her What I Learned Final Examination (Artifact), Emma

learned that I want to be a caring, loving, and funny teacher. I want my students to come into my classroom and want to be there. I want my students to not only learn, but enjoy themselves while they are learning.

Also in her Reflective Journal (Artifact) Emma noted, *Since different kids have different strengths, the way that the students learn varies from child to child* (Artifact: Reflective Journal).

So, Emma now realizes that *I need to use a variety of teaching methods in my classroom* (Artifact: What I Learned Final Examination). Finally, in Emma's Strengths Paper (Artifact), she acknowledged that *I really want to help my students be the best they can be in whatever arena they love.*

View of herself as a teacher. In several EDMS 5020 assignments, students were asked to examine their thoughts and feelings about their roles as teachers. Emma believes that *teachers need to be the role model in every situation* (Artifact: Classroom Guidance Plan). In addition, she wants students to recognize her passion for teaching,

I want to put my best foot forward and show my students that I chose to be their teacher. I want them to know that every day is a new day and that we will be showcasing our strengths to each other, I will do anything in my power to help kids leave me at the end of the school year smarter and better people than when I first met them. (Preprofessional Experience Follow-up Question 4)

Emma sees her role as a teacher of that of a mother. In her teaching metaphor she wrote,

I believe that teachers are like mothers. Like mothers, teachers have to care for their students, take interest in their learning, know their students' strengths and weaknesses, provide necessary materials if needed, be available for their students, know where their

students are coming from, know their previous experiences, and know about their students' lives. From day one of a child's life with a mother and a student's life with a teacher, that mother/teacher is responsible for her child/student. A mother has to know where her child is at all times just like a teacher needs to know where her students are at all times. If a child is missing in a fire drill, the teacher will be expected to know where the student is at the current time. Mothers and teachers are responsible for teaching their children/students life skills. Mothers and teachers alike are expected to know their children and know about their children's lives. Just like mothers, teachers are expected to correct students' behavior. Just as a mother would not treat two of her children the same way, neither should a teacher. Mothers and teachers should take into account the differences in their children/students. A teacher needs to tend to the needs of each student just like a mother would tend to the needs of each child. (Teaching Metaphor)

When asked about background differences and similarities. In the first interview, Emma explained that, to her, the phrase background differences and similarities meant

someone different from my background, that has different cultural aspects, ethnicity. . . . they have been raised in a different, maybe different countries, or different cultures. . . . Different language, different eating habits, different ways of looking, different clothes they wear, different values and morals.

Also during the First Interview, Emma explained that her *ideal* classroom would consist of

students that are on the same belief [religious beliefs] level that I am, or just understanding what I believe. It is very hard for me, because I am very vocal about my faith, not in a bad way, but I like to express how I feel and I think it is very difficult

because you can't do that in a public school. . . . I know there are some Christian teachers that say, "Well, I am just going to say it and if I get fired, I get fired" and that is not what I think, I think you should follow the rules while you are at school.

Emma acknowledged that it is very *difficult to know the boundaries in public schools* (Interview #2). Therefore, Emma wants to be a teacher *where everyone could potentially have the same belief system, what I am free to talk about religion without consequences* (Follow-up Member Check). Nevertheless, Emma admits that

everyone says to me, "Well, don't you think that they need Christian teachers in public schools?" and I am like "Yes, I do believe that we need moral teachers in school" and if . . . I feel like God is leading me to go, then I will teach in public schools..I am like, you know, there are kids in private schools that do not have a Christian background at all and I am like, you know that is why I am there, because of that too and like I want to instill that in kids at the same time I understand it might already be instilled . . . I think that is a big part of being a teacher at a Christian school.

Emma emphasized that *background differences* [and similarities], [e.g., socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, etc.], *didn't matter to her*, but the *freedom to discuss her religious beliefs did matter* (Interview #2).

Analysis of Emma's Narrative

Emma's perceptions of background differences and similarities focused on religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status primarily. In addition, Emma recognized familial structure, familial support, language, transience patterns, culture, home localities, gender, students with disabilities, and students with varying abilities, as distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities. In the analysis, Emma's words are shown in italics.

Religion

In this study, religion serves as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Emma's perception of religion was both awareness and acknowledgement. Emma's religion has been a constant in her life, as such, she was aware of religion while growing up and during her participation in the Middle School Program.

In Emma's early life, she was *Catholic*. Her family converted to *Christianity* later in her life. Currently, Emma's entire family is actively involved in a *large non-denominational church* near their home. Emma is aware that *religion encompasses my whole life*. Emma teaches Sunday school, *sings* at a Bible study, and *volunteers* when needed. Emma is very much aware of her religious beliefs; she is a *strong Christian*. Nonetheless, Emma *never imposes her beliefs* on anyone, but *respects* people for their *beliefs*. Emma has complete *faith and trust in the Lord*. Emma believes that *God leads her path* and she *tries to live in a good way—a way that would be satisfying to the Lord*.

When completing her required Preprofessional Experience, Emma worked as a summer camp counselor. She *chose a Christian camp* because she wanted to be around people who had beliefs similar to hers. The counselors were *expected to teach about God*. From this experience, Emma *thinks* she would like to teach in a *Christian school* where she will have the *opportunity to teach children about God*.

However, during her second semester in the Middle School Program, Emma became aware that her ideal classroom would consist of students with the *same religious beliefs* as her own. She explained that she has a *hard time* when asked about her *faith* because she is *vocal* about it. However, Emma is aware that the sharing of her beliefs would be unacceptable in a public school setting. In addition, Emma would *follow the rules* at a public school and *not talk*

about God unless asked specifically and even then, she would let students *talk it out for themselves*. Emma does not want to be *controversial*.

Through this realization, Emma acknowledged two things. First, Emma acknowledged the need for *careful lesson planning*. She had written a lesson in which students compared and contrasted the events related to the September 11th attacks and Pearl Harbor. In the lesson, Emma asked students to imagine how they would feel and to write down three related emotions—feelings of *hate* was the example supplied. Upon reflection, she realized that someone from a non-Christian faith, i.e., Muslim, might be made to feel uncomfortable. Therefore, Emma acknowledged her need to really think about her lessons and be careful so as to not be controversial. In this explanation, Emma professed an intent to discretely address religion in her teaching practice. Second, Emma acknowledged that background differences and similarities—*other than religion*—did not matter to her when teaching. The *freedom to discuss her religion* in the school setting did. Emma believes that she will teach in a Christian school, but will see where *God is leading her*. This acknowledgement definitely professed an intent to directly address religion in her teaching practice.

Ethnicity

Emma frequently mentioned ethnicity, as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Emma's perception of ethnicity occurred at the awareness (conscious recognition level) until after being in the Middle School Program.

As Emma grew up, she lived in a *primarily White* neighborhood. According to Emma, the students with whom she attended school were *just White*. However, she did estimate that of the 2,000 students in her high school, *maybe 50 were Black*.

Emma's awareness of different ethnicities increased upon entering the Middle School Program. In her EPSY 2020 class, Emma tutored an *African American* boy. Attempting to comply with the requirements outlined by the Preprofessional Experience, Emma completed a portion of the Preprofessional Experience as a teaching assistant and tutor in a *primarily minority school*—this exposure was different for Emma because she *went to schools that primarily taught White children*. Emma's awareness (conscious recognition) did increase though, she recalled learning about *race* though this experience.

According to Emma, [Creek Lake Elementary], the school where she completed her EDMS 5020 Field Experience had a *diverse* student population; 85% White, 5% Asian, 4% Black, and 2% Multi-racial. The students in her specific class were *primarily White*. Emma worked with a variety of children during her Field Experience, *not necessarily* students from a *particular ethnic group*. Adam, the focus of her Shadow Study, was a *Caucasian* boy. When Emma shared her Venn diagram that compared and contrasted her background with Adam's, she explained, *We are both European nationality, Caucasians, and we both went to schools with primarily Caucasians*.

Only one time since being in the Middle School Program has Emma acknowledged ethnicity. This acknowledgement occurred during the second semester of her participation in the Middle School Program. Emma acknowledged her need to be *very careful* when planning lessons. Emma planned a lesson after reading *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. DuBois. She planned to engage students in a discussion of racism and issues surrounding the divide between Black and White people. Emma acknowledged that *just all kinds of crazy things in the classroom* could have occurred. Emma admitted that she tends to think of *controversial issues* that she could teach *without thinking* about the *implications* for the *classroom*. Through this

acknowledgement, Emma professed an intent to *carefully* address issues of ethnicity in her teaching practice.

Socioeconomic Status

In this study, socioeconomic status is a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Emma's perception of socioeconomic status was that of awareness (conscious recognition). Growing up, Emma lived in a *fairly wealthy* suburb of Atlanta. She lived in a *middle to upper class* neighborhood. Emma's father *made his way up the corporate ladder* and now works as a *Vice President* of an environmental company. Emma's mother is a *housewife with no children at home*. Emma's older sister graduated from the University of Georgia with a Degree in Finance. When Emma admitted wanting to be a teacher, her father tried to get her to change fields, because he was *concerned* about the *average salary* of a teacher.

After entering the Middle School Program, Emma's perception of socioeconomic status remained at the awareness (conscious recognition) level. When discussing her Preprofessional Experience, Emma explained that as a camp counselor, the *money* was not her *reward*. She was paid \$1250 for nine weeks of work. In her other Preprofessional Experience, Emma described the students, in the class where she tutored and volunteered as a teaching assistant, as *lower to middle class children*. She learned about *issues of poverty* working with these children. In her EDMS 5020 Field Experience, the students in Emma's class were *lower to middle class children*, about *one-fifth (18.2%)* of students *qualify for free or reduced lunch prices*. Finally, when sharing her Venn diagram, Emma said, *my student was in the lower-middle class and I am high*.

Familial Structure

In this study, familial structure refers to the type of family to which a person belongs, such as, one-parent, two-parent, foster, blended, nuclear, and divorced. Emma's perception of

familial structure was awareness (conscious recognition). Emma's familial structure encompasses a father, mother, and an older sister. Adam, the focus of Emma's Shadow Study, has a similar familial structure. Adam's familial structure encompasses parents that have been married for 14 years. He has an older sister, and a younger brother.

Familial Support

Familial support refers to the ways (e.g., motivating, encouraging, assisting) in which various members of a family are either positively or negatively involved in each other's lives. Emma's perception of familial support was awareness (conscious recognition) until entering the Middle School Program. Reflecting on her early years, Emma is now aware that she was *lucky to grow up in such a loving environment*. Emma is aware that her parents *instilled strong morals and values* in her. Emma indicates that she has a *close knit family*. In addition, Emma's mother is her *best friend*. Emma is aware that her mother is *always there* for her and will *drop anything* for her.

Since being in the Middle School Program, Emma's awareness of familial support has expanded. She was aware of the *loving families* the students had, but she was also aware that it was *completely different from her background*.

Through the completion of her required Preprofessional Experience, Emma acknowledged that her camp counselor experience taught her how to be a *mother and a teacher at the same time*. Also, in her Teaching Metaphor, Emma said a *teacher is like a mother . . . like mothers, teachers have to care for their students, take interest in their learning, know their students strengths and weaknesses*. . . In these statements, Emma acknowledged how the role of a teacher and the role of a mother are, at least for her, the same. With this acknowledgement, Emma professed an intent to address familial support in her teaching practice.

Language

In this study, language serves as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Emma's perception of language was awareness (conscious recognition) and only occurred after being in the Middle School Program. Emma was aware of Adam's (her Shadow Study student) language. She said, *Adam is an English-speaking child.*

Transience Patterns

Transience patterns refer to patterns of relocation or moving from one place to another. Emma's perception level of transience patterns was that of awareness (conscious recognition). Emma had lived in New Jersey, Washington, and Georgia before entering kindergarten. Her family settled in a suburb of Atlanta which was where she remained during her years of schooling. However, the suburb grew and Emma *kept getting moved* from school to school. Emma was aware of Adam's, the focus of her Shadow Study, transience patterns as well. According to Emma, Adam has *grown up in the same county all his life.*

Culture

In this study, culture is a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Emma was only aware of culture after beginning her participation in the Middle School Program. Emma was aware that during her required Preprofessional Experience, she was able to work with *students from different cultures*. When attempting to identify the distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities, Emma was aware that it included *someone that has different cultural aspects, someone that was raised in different cultures . . . language, eating habits, ways of looking, clothes people wear, and values and morals.*

Home Localities

Home localities refer to type of place a person is from—urban, suburban, or rural. In this study, Emma’s perception of home localities occurred at the awareness level only. Emma described her home locality as *suburban...a suburb of Atlanta*. Once in the Middle School Program, Emma identified the home localities where her Preprofessional and Field Experiences took place. Emma’s Preprofessional Experience School was in an *urban* area. Emma was aware of the *rural* locality in which her EDMS 5020 Field Experience occurred; [Creek Lake Elementary] is a *rural* school.

Gender

In this study, gender is a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Emma’s perception of gender only occurred after being in the Middle School Program. Emma was aware of the gender of the students with whom she worked. For example, in her Preprofessional Experience, the campers—*all female*; the gender of the students she tutored for the Preprofessional Experience—*two males*; the gender of the student she tutored for her ESPY 2020 class—*male*; and the gender of the students at [Creek Lake Elementary]—*236 students are male and 196 are female*. In addition, Emma identified the gender of the teachers at [Creek Lake Elementary] as *primarily female*. And, Adam, the student who was the focus of Emma’s Shadow Study was *male*.

Based on a portion of her Preprofessional Experience, Emma developed more awareness of the individuality of people. She said that the *girls* [at camp] *taught her that everyone is unique*. Emma furthered the development of her awareness through admitting that *every girl was completely different in her views and her way of learning*.

Students with Disabilities

In this study, students with disabilities refer to students who have been officially identified as learning disabled and receive special services to meet their educational needs. Emma's perception of students with disabilities occurred as awareness (conscious recognition). During her Preprofessional Experience, Emma tutored *two children with learning disabilities*. Also during this experience, Emma became aware of *issues related to special education*. Although Emma did not interact with students with disabilities during her EDMS 5020 Field Experience, Emma was aware of the percentages of students in [Creek Lake Elementary] who were officially classified—*5% of the students receive gifted education, 11.4 % of students receive special education, and 28.8% receive an individualized education plan (IEP)*.

Interacting with students with disabilities, increased Emma's awareness of the challenge teaching these students can be. Emma learned that *teaching children with disabilities is very trying on a teacher*. In addition, Emma is aware that it is *difficult to watch a child struggle*.

Students with Varying Abilities

For the purposes of this study, students' varying ability levels are distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities. Emma perceived many differences among students. Her perception occurred at both the awareness and acknowledgement levels. Emma became aware of students with varying abilities after being admitted to the Middle School Program.

Emma's awareness is evident in the comments she makes about students which are based on the complication of her experiences. For example, Emma said, *each child is unique and has varying defining characteristics, every student learns differently than his/her peers, different kids have different strengths, and the way the student learns varies from child to child*. The ultimate

example of Emma's awareness of students with varying abilities was her admission that *differences among students are a way for them to be individuals.*

In addition to awareness of student behaviors, Emma is aware of how teachers should act toward students with varying abilities. She said, *teachers need to be sensitive to the fact that every student learns in a unique way.* In addition, Emma said, *every teacher needs to ensure that various methods are used to help their students achieve maximum potential.* She continued by acknowledging her role as a teacher. Emma said, *I will ensure that I focus on every student as an individual and incorporate each child's interest into my teaching.* In this statement, Emma professed an intent to address the needs of students with varying ability levels in her teaching practice.

Through the analysis of Emma's Narrative, it is evident that the majority of her perception occurred at the awareness (conscious recognition) level. However, Emma did acknowledge some distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities that she will address in her teaching practice. As Emma's interactions with people with background differences and similarities increased, so did her perception level. As experiences gain meaning, perception becomes greater.

Kendra's Story

Growing Up

Japan, England, South Dakota, Georgia, and Illinois are all places Kendra has lived. Her father was in the Air Force and her family relocated as they were ordered to do so. Kendra vaguely remembered attending Montessori school in Japan—taught by her mother. School in England was *less diverse than here.* Kendra recalled working at her own pace, completing

workbooks, wearing uniforms, and having *less opportunity and less encouragement from teachers to be unique* (Interview #1).

Kendra's academic experiences in South Dakota, Georgia, and Illinois were similar; the interactions with people were not. Because Kendra was in school in South Dakota for less than a year, she remembers very little about it. However, in the Georgia schools that Kendra attended, there was a *varied mix of students and ability levels and I got pulled out for accelerated classes* (Interview #1). Kendra explained that the *varied mix of students* meant . . . *just middle, lower, different economic status, and. . . different races, there were African American and White* (Interview #1). Kendra claimed that the school district in Illinois was *a lot better. . . it was upper and middle class people. . . mostly White, and there were a few Latino students* (Interview #1). In addition, the students were tracked and Kendra was in separate classes. When asked which group Kendra felt she best fit into, she explained,

I don't know because I moved around a lot, I just kind of fit in wherever, it [Georgia] was different from Illinois, because everyone [in Illinois] was [sic] just raised. . . . they hadn't had any interaction with African American people or whatever. I just remember hearing some really funny stories about the first time that they [students in Illinois] met someone of a different race, just like they were living in a bubble or whatever. (Interview #1)

Regardless of the country, state, or school, Kendra always had the loving support of her family surrounding her. She described her family as *pretty close* (Interview #1). Kendra has an older sister who recently graduated from college and a younger brother who is currently in his second year of college. Kendra's mother is a teacher and her father retired from the military and

now works for a chemical company. Kendra identified her family as being *middle class* (Interview #1).

Although Kendra's parents now live in [Chicken], Georgia, Kendra does not think of it as her hometown due to the many moves she made while growing up. Kendra shared her feelings about the frequency of her family's moves, *As a result of my family's many moves during my childhood, I feel that I have acquired many life skills that I may not have otherwise gained. In accordance, I really appreciate change and I enjoy meeting new people* (Artifact: Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher).

The Middle School Program

Kendra is a third year student at The University of Georgia. In her Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher (Artifact), Kendra explained *my fondness of books led me to select Language Arts as my primary specialization and my secondary specialization is Mathematics*. Ever since she was a child, Kendra *aspired to become a teacher* (Artifact: Letter of Introduction to the Mentor Teacher). As a teacher, her mother serves as a huge inspiration to Kendra. Kendra admits to having learned a lot from her.

EPSY 2020: Learning and development in education. This educational psychology course is a prerequisite for the Middle School Program. Often, the instructors require students to engage in a Field Experience, community service, or project. In Kendra's case, she had to complete a project. However, the instructor did not include specific requirements (e.g., volunteer in a diverse classroom setting, interact with people different from your background), so Kendra interviewed a student teacher. She wanted to learn about the experience and find out what she was really getting into.

Preprofessional experience. In order to fulfill the Preprofessional Experience requirement, which involved spending 100 volunteer or paid hours working with young adolescents, in two different settings, one of which had to be different from the preservice teacher's background, Kendra worked as a YMCA Summer Camp Counselor and in [Guinea Hen Elementary School], a local elementary school's Afterschool Program.

For approximately five weeks, Kendra worked as a camp counselor with girls between the ages of 7 and 15. Kendra described the majority of girls as *extremely wealthy . . . they are [were] able to afford things such as private planes and home theatres* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 3). In comparing herself to the campers, Kendra explained, *my family and I have never been in want, but I have never experienced the life of luxury that some of the girls have grown up in* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 3). The majority of girls at the camp were *White* (Interview #2).

According to Kendra, *summer camp encourages the development of children into responsible, respectful, and well-rounded individuals* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience, Question 1). During part of the summer, some *African American girls were sponsored to come* (Interview #2). Kendra explained that these girls were *kids that don't have any money* (Interview #2). Kendra said that it *. . . was kind of interesting how they mixed because they are kind of two contradicting cultures* (Interview #2). She did not have much to say about their interactions because these girls were not in her group.

However, when talking about the girls with whom she did interact, Kendra shared that *she was on call 24 hours a day. . . . Even at night when you are sleeping, you are on call for homesick and physically ill campers* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience Question 6). In addition, Kendra noticed that the girls had different religious backgrounds, *it was actually a*

Christian camp, but some of the girls came from Jewish families, I remember some of the girls talking about being Jewish or Catholic . . . (Interview #2).

When explaining what she learned from this experience, Kendra said, *Children this age are old enough to do things on their own and yet young enough to still admire and respect adults with an awe and fascination. Children this age are so formable and anxious to learn* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience Question 9). In addition, Kendra clarified that this experience *did not change my decision to become a middle level teacher, but rather it inspired me to become a teacher who will make a difference in the lives of young people* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience Question 10). As a camp counselor, Kendra *hoped to positively influence and make an impact in the lives of each and every camper I met* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience Question 1).

As an employee in [Guinea Hen Elementary's], Afterschool Program, Kendra coordinated special activities, supervised play, tutored students, and helped them with their homework. She was mainly responsible for third through fifth grade students, but would sometimes work with younger children. The majority of children in the After-school Program were African American, but there were a few White children, too. However, Kendra *got to know them [the students] and forgot their color* (Interview #2).

Question Number 2 on the Preprofessional Experience Form (Artifact) asked, "What community issue, concern, or need did this experience address. Kendra explained,

An after-school program provides extended school day care for children whose parents work and are not able to afford babysitters or more expensive means of childcare. An after-school program provides a safe, nurturing environment that encourages children's growth and social development. In addition, an after-school program offers tutoring and

extra instructional help to students. This can be very beneficial to students, especially those who have working or non-existent parents and no way of receiving help at home.

Kendra expounded on the differences between herself and the after-school program students, she wrote,

As a child growing up, my parents worked, but they always made time for my siblings and me and my mom was almost always home when we came home from school. Most of the children I worked with at the after-school program had non-existent parents or ones who were too busy to spend time with their kids. Also, a lot of the children I worked with were lower class and closer to the poverty level than I grew up as. (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience Question 3)

When asked what she found most satisfying about the Preprofessional Experience, Kendra replied, . . . *simply working with the children. . . . It was also very rewarding to arrive each day to smiling faces and excited children . . .* (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience Question 6). Kendra acknowledged that her understanding of young adolescents and their families has changed since working in the After-school Program,

working with the ASP children opened my eyes to a lot of things that I did not realize existed. The innocence of youth today is being taken away at earlier and earlier times of their development. We [After-school program employees] had to deal with sexual issues among 4-year olds and explicit comments coming out of the youngest children's mouths. From observation and conversation, I discovered that most of the children pick up these behaviors from older siblings and parents. It is very disheartening that children today are developing these habits at such a young age. (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience Question 7)

Through this experience, Kendra has *confirmed* that she loves children. She *learned* that she prefers to work with older children. However, she is *concerned* about her classroom management skills and ability to *effectively* discipline children (Artifact: Preprofessional Experience Question 8).

Entrance essay. In the Entrance Essay (Artifact) Kendra wrote to gain acceptance into the Middle School Program, she clearly articulates that teaching at the middle level is for her. . .

Contrary to popular opinion, my years in middle school were perhaps my favorite and most memorable of all my years in school. My personal experiences in middle school and my experiences with middle school age children led to an interest in working with this age group long term. Middle school is a very difficult age for a lot of children, as they are undergoing a lot of changes physically, emotionally, and socially. The challenge of this age group attracts me because I enjoy challenging myself. I believe that I would be able to provide the right mix of care and discipline in a classroom setting that children in this age group need. (Entrance Essay)

Also in Kendra's Entrance Essay (Artifact), she described the purposes of schooling. According to Kendra,

The fundamental purposes of schooling are first and foremost to educate the students. It is important that we supply the students with knowledge that they will be able to build upon and use in their lives. Schooling plays a vital role in the mental, physical, and social development of children. It is important that schooling meet every child's needs in each of these areas, because the children may not have the opportunity to obtain this development elsewhere.

Kendra continues by describing more purposes of education by stating,

Schooling also has other purposes than the education and development of children. A school is responsible for the care of its students. Caring for students involves being aware of disabilities and handicaps that exist and compensating for them in the classroom. Caring for students also involves watching for signs of abuse and neglect that the children may be facing outside of the school. (Artifact: Entrance Essay)

When asked to provide further detail about her statement: *Contrary to popular opinion, my years in middle school were perhaps my favorite and most memorable of all my years in school*, Kendra said, . . . *some people dread that [middle school years]. . . (Interview #2)*. Kendra added more to her answer during a member check,

there are a lot of issues that come up in children's lives during middle school. . . it is a really difficult time for the students and their parents. They [the children] are in between being a child and an adult and are struggling to find where they fit it. A lot of times, they [the children] turn to their peers which is not always a good thing. (Interview #2)

Kendra wants to be a role model for young adolescents; she *wants to be there during that time [middle school years] in a child's life to help provide that guidance . . . (Interview #2)*.

Philosophy of education. During the beginning of the EDMS 5020: Educating Young Adolescents class, students are asked to write their Philosophy of Education. Students are given the opportunity to revise their Philosophy of Education throughout the Middle School Program. When writing her original Philosophy of Education (Artifact), Kendra reiterated a few of the beliefs she espoused in her Entrance Essay (Artifact). She wrote:

I believe that teachers play such a vital role in our society and have a huge influence on our future. Educators have the ability to mold the next generation. . . . An effective

teacher possesses many qualities and characteristics that allow him or her to be successful in meeting the needs of the diverse group of young adolescents. In the middle grades stage of their lives, young adolescents find themselves in a state of confusion—somewhere between childhood and being an adult. The important thing to keep in mind is that no two children are alike. . .

As Kendra continued writing her Philosophy of Education (Artifact), she described the role of a teacher. . . *discipliner, comforter, mediator, confidant, and friend*. Kendra explained what she meant when referencing a *diverse group of young adolescents—they are just on different cognitive, social, physical, and emotional levels and no two are alike* (Interview #2). Kendra ended her original Philosophy of Education by acknowledging that a teacher's expectations of the students are essential—children want to perform.

After the EDMS 5020 Field Experience, students were asked to revise their Philosophy of Education. Kendra's revised Philosophy of Education (Artifact) had a different focus. She wrote,

My revised Philosophy of Education revolves around the following five basic behaviors of young adolescent students. . . students will be responsible. . . . students will work to reach the expectations that respected adults hold for them. . . . students will respond to a teacher who meets them where they are. . . . students will more effectively absorb knowledge when they can relate to the material. . . students will mimic their teacher's attitude about learning. . .

Field experience. A significant component of the EDMS 5020 methods course is the six-week Field Experience. Students report to their assigned school everyday for two hours. During this time, students engage in meaningful activities with young adolescents. Sometimes, students

are placed in environments that are completely foreign to them. Kendra shared that this is what happened to her

The school that I was at during my field placement was different from all of the schools that I have been in. It was almost half and half Latino students and African American students and they had a very low academic level and there was a lot of friction between the two communities to, a lot of Spanish speaking students, which I had little experience with. . . . And the two groups of parents and prejudices and stuff, just kind of didn't get along very well and that wasn't something that I had experienced before. (Interview #1)

Kendra expressed her feelings about the students, she said,

loved the kids, they are precious and they are eager to learn. . . . the teacher would have me work with those that were struggling. . . . it was hard for me to communicate with the ones who didn't speak English very well, which is something that is frustrating for me personally. But just using a lot of hand motions or talking, not really slow, but pronounced my words and trying to use a lot of visuals so that when I am teaching them that they will get it. (Interview #1)

In addition, Kendra recognized the varying degrees of parental involvement in the student's education. Some parents promoted attitudes of nonchalance and other parents were very supportive and involved in the educational process. There was a mix of family support among the students in Kendra's class. She stated, *some of them didn't have to do work and their parents didn't care at all* (Interview #1).

Kendra described the differences between herself and the students from her Field Experience class,

As a student, I always wanted to learn, always wanted to read and was pushed a lot at home. Not pushed, but I mean, my parents always made sure that I had my homework done and anything less than an A was just not really good enough and I mean the students in my Field Experience were not motivated, these students were making C's and lower grades and stuff, it was okay because their parents didn't really care and that is different from when I was a student and would have been in trouble for making a C, some of them have the same passion for learning and so just through my perception and the teacher's help, just kind of identifying their areas of interest, and then trigger whatever to push it further. (Interview #1)

Perhaps the most surprising experiences Kendra had in her Field Experience was learning about the worldliness of the students. Being in a fifth grade class, Kendra expected that a certain level of innocence would exist among the children. She explained,

some of them were pretty much being brought up by an older sibling and they come in and tell me about these movie they watched, that I wouldn't even watch now, and just some of the dances and behaviors that they picked up from their siblings that were practically raising them and stuff, and so that was different. (Interview #1)

Adding to the explanation, Kendra shared,

Me, and my mentor teacher, were both like, "Oh my goodness." I was just kinds of like I can not believe, I wouldn't even watch that. . . it is shocking for me, what they are exposed to at this age. . . it is kind of sad too, they loose their innocence so young. (Interview #1)

Kendra identified the things that her students were exposed to

the music lyrics are just horrid and they are listening to the rap music lyrics about sex and drugs and just all kinds of stuff and it is a lot of times, they don't know what they are singing, but you know, just like motions for dances and that stuff, very, very provocative.

(Interview #1)

Shadow study. While engaging in meaningful activities in their Field Experience class, students have to complete a Shadow Study (Artifact) of one young adolescent in the class. In this study, students identify the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social characteristics of the young adolescent selected for the study. Before actually describing the young adolescent, students provide a description of the school in which the Field Experience took place. In the description of her school, Kendra wrote,

[Southside] Elementary School is located among trailer parks and car dealerships in a low-income housing area. The students who attend the school come from primarily two backgrounds: African American (62.9%) and Hispanic (24%). Caucasian students make up 9.8 percent of the school's population. The school serves a widely poverty stricken area. 92.6% of its students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. More students at Southside Elementary are enrolled in English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), 15.2% than the 7.9% who are involved in the gifted program. The school tragically lies in the midst of a raging war between races. Foreigners who have moved to the land of opportunities in hopes of a better life for themselves and their families find African Americans native to the area, very unwelcoming and unwilling to accept the newcomers into their lifestyle. The ongoing conflict between adults trickles down into their children and causes conflict at the school with the students between the races. It also creates a

rather large barrier that prevents community and parental involvement. As a result, strong, positive relationships have not been built with parents or the community. In most cases, people from the community just do not feel welcome. Language issues are a big problem. At PTO and other meetings in the past, language translations have been very inconsistent and as a result are sources of frustration for non-English speaking community members. In addition, English speakers become frustrated with the translations because they do not like to listen to them. (Artifact: Shadow Study)

Tom, the focus of Kendra's Shadow Study, was ten years old, spoke English, was Caucasian, and came from a low socioeconomic status. In addition, Tom lives with his grandmother, who is his primary caretaker, even though Tom's mother lives nearby. Kendra admitted that Tom's grandmother is *very concerned about how he is doing in school and holds high expectations for Tom* (Artifact: Shadow Study). Kendra does note that Tom frequently misses school. However, Tom is seen as a leader in the class. According to Kendra, this could be because he is *mature beyond his years* (Artifact: Shadow Study). Oddly enough, Tom is overweight and the only male Caucasian student in the class.

During the Focus Group Interview, Kendra explained her Venn diagram that compared and contrasted her background with Tom's background. She declared,

In my, it really included a lot of characteristics; you know things in our background. But I grew up with both my parents who are still married; they both played an active role in raising me. And he grew up, lives with his grandparents, I think his parents are around, but they don't, they don't take an active role in raising him. He is an only child and I have two siblings who are very close to my age. I moved around a lot when I was a child, and had opportunity to travel; he has lived in the same place in Georgia all of his life. I

am middle class, I guess, and he would be lower class SES. Both of us had caretakers who kept after us to do well in school His grandmother was involved and my parents were like that too. We are both motivated to learn.

During the group discussion of Venn diagrams, Kendra added that Tom was

actually more motivated than others in the class and I was kind of interested to see what was really motivating him. . . . he was like one of the only White children in the classroom and so I just wanted to see how that kind of influenced things that he did and I just thought it was interesting how he fit in with the different groups and stuff. (Focus Group)

In her Shadow Study (Artifact), Kendra explained that the importance of conducting studies like this about students was to understand where the student comes from, what the student's family is like, what the student is interested in, and how the student learns best. She feels that having a deep understanding of students will make her a better teacher of them. In addition, Kendra realized that

I need to make an extra effort in the future to refrain from making initial judgments and not take first impressions into consideration. When I first saw Tom, I automatically jumped to some very incorrect assumptions about him as a student and a learner. As a teacher, it is very important to allow every student to start on the same page and prove to you who they are. (Artifact: Shadow Study)

Second semester. When asked about her current interactions with young adolescents who have backgrounds different from her own, Kendra referred to her ESOL class. Kendra has learned . . . *a lot from the book and discussions in ESOL, I am working with ESOL students and*

teaching them and they have backgrounds different than me (Focus Group). In a further description of the course required interaction, Kendra stated,

we had to spend fifteen hours in observation, we had to teach eight lessons—including in those fifteen hours. And then we had to observe three additional classes and we had to interview someone who works with immigrants and that really taught me a lot, it was really cool learning about how parents react when they first come to the country, I think it is great if you are learning about ESOL, you need to be working with them. (Focus Group)

Kendra does not fluently speak a foreign language, she learned French in high school and took one year of Spanish at The University of Georgia, but has not retained knowledge of either language. She wishes she had. Kendra suggested encouraging preservice teachers to become proficient in a foreign language.

Looking to the future. Anticipating the remainder of her career as a preservice teacher, Kendra looks forward to gaining *more experience, just to learn from those experiences, and just being open to learning about different things, and differences* (Interview #2). Kendra has been preparing to be a teacher forever,

I wanted to be a teacher since before I can remember, so I have always kind of watched my teachers and how they do things and how they interact with us and the methods they used and so ever since I was really young, I was doing that, I have seen a variety of styles and stuff...(Interview #1)

Therefore, Kendra is excited about her future as a teacher.

Kendra has realized, though, that when lesson planning, she must consider the backgrounds of her students when planning. During her Field Experience, Kendra faced an

interesting situation, we were doing perimeter and area, and I was researching ways to use that, I came across you know a farmer that put a fence around his farm and it never occurred to me that, that I hadn't really necessarily thought about planning things for the farm and that was kind of foreign to them, so it wasn't like an applicable problem to them. (Focus Group)

View of herself as a teacher. Throughout the Middle School Program, students have many opportunities to reflect on their learning experiences and their role as a teacher. In several assignments, Kendra acknowledged her role as a teacher. In her Strengths Paper (Artifact), Kendra stated, *A middle school teacher must play the role of discipliner, comforter, mediator, confidant, and friend, in addition to concentrating on meeting state and national requirements for instruction* (Artifact: Strengths Paper). Also in her Strengths Paper (Artifact), Kendra referred to herself as a teacher specifically and shared,

Born with a heart for children and blessed with patience and love for young adolescents, I feel that it is my calling to be in a profession where I am able to make a difference in the life of a child. I have been gifted with strengths that I believe will make me an effective and successful teacher. I hope to be able to use these strengths to enrich the lives of my students and all whom I will come in contact with. I believe that it is a high honor to be able to teach young adolescents, and I hope to be worth of this honor someday in the near future. (Artifact: Strengths Paper)

Kendra compared the role of a teacher to that of a chemist. In her Metaphor (Artifact), she wrote,

A teacher as a chemist. Constantly adding a little bit of this and a little bit of that, throwing in a bit of sternness, a bit of knowledge, and a bit of love; sometimes chemical have reactions with each other that cause an explosion. So a teacher is always ready for

the unpredictable and prepared to clean it up. Always comes well equipped for each today with goggles, lab coat, etc., lesson plans, back up plans, materials, and resources. A teacher, like a chemist, thinks things through before beginning a new experiment for class, but is always able to be flexible should something unexpected arise. Always experimenting to find what works best and always working towards her goal, the final product, a well grounded, well equipped knowledgeable and eager student learner.

(Teaching Metaphor)

When asked about background differences and similarities. When asked what her perceptions of background differences and similarities were before entering the Middle School Program, Kendra replied, Prior to my preprofessional [experience], I guess I didn't really think too much about how background differences [and similarities] played a role in education and how you interact with other students in the class. (Focus Group) As a preservice teacher, Kendra believes that

It is important to know what your students' backgrounds are, and where they are coming from. Just as it is important for them to know where you are coming from, and just to connect with them, and have that relationship with your students, and you can really reach students and part of that will be knowing their backgrounds.(Focus Group)

In addition, she explained

I think the important thing should be [to be] aware of the background differences [and similarities], but make sure that you are not like being biased a certain way and make sure that you are not teaching off of your own background differences, but that you are including everyone's background. (Focus Group)

Finally, Kendra clarified, *You don't just talk about someone with different background differences, you go out and experience them and that is how you learn about them.* (Focus Group)

Analysis of Kendra's Narrative

Familial Structure

In this study, familial structure refers to the type of family to which a person belongs, such as, one-parent, two parent, foster, blended, nuclear, and divorced. Kendra's perception of familial structure was that of awareness (conscious recognition). Kendra has a *pretty close family*. Her familial structure includes two parents—who are *still married*, one older sister, and one younger brother.

Kendra's awareness of familial structure increased since she entered the Middle School Program. Kendra, probably unconsciously, compared the familial structure of the students with whom she has worked to her own. Kendra was not judgmental, but aware of the vast differences between her upbringing and the upbringing of the students. For example, when completing her required Preprofessional Experience, Kendra worked in an Afterschool Program. According to Kendra, the students in the Afterschool Program had *non-existent parents and were pretty much being brought up by older siblings*. Even though Kendra's parents both worked, *they always made time for my siblings and me*. Kendra recalled that her mother worked but, she was *almost always* home when she and her siblings arrived home from school.

Through the completion of her Shadow Study, Kendra gained awareness regarding the differences between her familial structure and that of Tom, the student focus of her study. Different from her, Tom lives with his *grandmother—even though his mother lives nearby*.

Another difference Kendra identified between Tom and her is *siblings*. Kendra has *two siblings who are close in age* and Tom is an *only child*.

Familial Support

Familial support, refers to ways (e.g., motivating, encouraging, assisting) in which various members of a family are either positively or negatively involved in each other's lives. Kendra's perception of familial support was at the awareness (conscious recognition) level. Kendra grew up with the *support* of her family. Kendra's parents *always made sure* that her homework had been completed and Kendra was aware that *anything less than an A was not just really good enough*.

Kendra's awareness of the differences and similarities in familial support increased through her participation in the Middle School Program. By working in an Afterschool Program, Kendra recognized the benefits of such programs, but also became aware of the differences in familial support among students in schools. According to Kendra, an ASP [Afterschool Program] *can be very beneficial to students, especially those who have non-existent parents and no way of receiving help at home* and most of the ASP children had *busy parents* with minimal *time* for *their kids*. Through her work with the *ASP children*, Kendra realized that *the innocence of youth* is being taken away very early in their development.

The differences in familial support were evident in Kendra's EDMS 5020 Field Experience class as well. Kendra discovered that some students were *making C's* and their *parents didn't care*. However, Tom, the focus of Kendra's Shadow Study, did have a supportive home environment—*his grandmother was concerned and holds high expectations for him..* When sharing her Venn diagram, Kendra noted the similarities between her and Tom, she said,

Both of us had caretakers who kept after us to do well in school, his grandmother was involved, and my parents were like that, too.

Ethnicity

In this study, ethnicity serves as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Kendra's perception of ethnicity was at both the awareness and acknowledgement level. Kendra's father was in the military, because of this Kendra's family moved frequently. As a result of her frequent moves, Kendra had the opportunity to interact with a wide variety of people. Most memorable to her, however, has been her schooling experiences within the United States. Kendra attended schools in South Dakota, Georgia, Illinois, and Georgia—again.

Kendra remembers very little about her schooling in South Dakota. However, in her Georgia schools Kendra was aware of being around *different races* of students, *African American and White*. When Kendra moved to Illinois and attended school, she was aware of the lack of African Americans. Most of the students in Illinois were *White, and a few Latino*. Kendra remembers hearing *funny stories* regarding the *first* time that these students encountered with *African Americans*.

Due to her participation in the Middle School Program, Kendra's awareness of and interactions with students of a variety of ethnicities increased. While completing her required Preprofessional Experience, Kendra worked as a camp counselor. Kendra recalled the week that *African American girls were sponsored to come* to the camp. Kendra was aware of the *contradicting cultures* that existed among the campers. When working in the Afterschool Program, Kendra realized that the majority of students were *African American*, but there were some *White* students as well. During her EDMS 5020 Field Experience, the students in Kendra's

classroom were *almost half and half Latino students and African American students*. In addition, Kendra identified the demographics for [Southside Elementary] as a whole—62.9% African American, 24% Hispanic, 9.8% Caucasian. Interestingly enough, Tom, Kendra's Shadow Study student, was the *only White male* in the class.

As Kendra's awareness level increased, her acknowledgement level did, too. Kendra acknowledged that as she developed relationships with the *Afterschool Program kids*, she *forgot their color*. Kendra also acknowledged the need to make lesson plans relevant to the lives of students. During her EDMS 5020 Field Experience, Kendra planned and taught a lesson on area and perimeter in math. Her lesson included an example of a *farmer putting a fence around his field*. However, this was not an *applicable problem* to the students. It did not fit with their life experiences. It *never occurred* to Kendra that students would not understand this example. Kendra's acknowledgements indicate her professed intent to address ethnicity in her teaching practice—either by getting to know the students and seeing beyond their color or by making her lesson applicable to students' lives.

Socioeconomic Status

In this study, socioeconomic status is a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. The majority of Kendra's awareness of socioeconomic status took place after Kendra was admitted to the Middle School Program. Her perceptions of socioeconomic status are that of awareness. Kendra identified her family as *middle class*. Both of her parents work and all three of the children are college educated. Having had high school experiences in Georgia and Illinois, Kendra was aware of the differing socioeconomic levels among the students. According to Kendra, students in Georgia schools were *just middle, lower, different economic status* and students in Illinois schools were *upper middle class people*.

Once in the Middle School Program, Kendra's awareness of different socioeconomic statuses increased. In her experiences with students, Kendra worked with students raised in extreme wealth and in poverty. As a summer camp counselor, Kendra interacted with *extremely wealthy* girls who had *private planes and home theatres*. Kendra was aware of the differences between these girls and herself, she admitted that *her family has never been in want*, but she has not had the *life of luxury* that these girls had.

At the other end of the socioeconomic status spectrum were the Afterschool Program children. When comparing herself to these children, Kendra said that *a lot* of these children were *lower class* and *closer to the poverty level* than she was. In addition, Kendra was aware that the purpose of the ASP was to provide extended school day care for children whose *parents work* and *can't afford* babysitters or a *more expensive* means of childcare.

Kendra's awareness of differences in socioeconomic statuses skyrocketed during her EDMS 5020 Field Experience. Kendra's school was located among *trailer parks and car dealerships in a low-income housing area*. At [Southside Elementary School], 92.6% of the students qualified to receive free or reduced lunch prices. In her Venn diagram, Kendra compared herself to Tom, a student in her EDMS 5020 Field Experience class. Kendra noted, *I am middle class, and I guess, he would be lower class—socioeconomic status*.

Language

In this study, language is a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Kendra's perception of language was at the awareness (conscious recognition) and action (address background differences and similarities in teaching practice) levels. Kendra's awareness of language prior to entering the Middle School Program consisted of her learning

French in high school. Kendra did take one year of *Spanish* at the University of Georgia, but she does not remember any of it!

In her EDMS 5020 Field Experience class, Kendra interacted with *a lot of Spanish speaking* students. Effective communication was challenging for Kendra. She admitted, *it was hard for me to communicate with the one who didn't speak English*. Tom, the Kendra's Shadow Study student, spoke *English*—like Kendra, so their communication was not an issue.

In addition to effective communication being difficult for Kendra to conduct in class, effective communication was difficult for [Southside Elementary] to conduct with community members. Kendra's awareness of language increased as a result of the school's language problems—*language issues are a big problem*. Kendra recounted how school functions are a source of frustration for *non-English speaking* community members. She explained, *language translations have been inconsistent*. In addition, *English speakers* experience *frustration* during *translations* because they *don't like to listen*.

For the first and only time in this study, Kendra's perception level regarding language rose to the action level during her EDMS 5020 Field Experience. Kendra had to communicate with the *one who didn't speak English very well*. This was *frustrating* for Kendra. Nonetheless, Kendra communicated with these students by *just using a lot of hand motions or talking, not really slow, but pronounced [sic] my words and trying [sic] to use a lot of visuals*. Kendra engaged in teaching behaviors that addressed the background differences and similarities associated with language.

Currently, Kendra is taking an ESOL class. This class requires Kendra to interact with ESOL students. Kendra had to spend 15 hours in observation and teach 8 lessons and then observe for 3 more hours. Perhaps the most awareness raising activity was the interview Kendra

conducted with someone who works with immigrants. Kendra said, *it taught me a lot*. In addition, Kendra noted that it was *really cool* to learn about immigrant parents and their initial reactions to the United States.

Gender

In this study, gender serves as a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Kendra only perceives gender at the awareness level and only after being in the Middle School Program. Kendra was a camp counselor to *girls* between the ages of 7 and 15. Also, Tom, the focus of Kendra's Shadow Study was *male*.

Culture

For the purposes of this study, culture refers to the range of behaviors, attitudes, customs, beliefs, and interactions of people. Kendra was not perceptive of culture until working in the Middle School Program and even then, Kendra's perception was only that of awareness.

[Southside Elementary] school, the school where Kendra completed her EDMS 5020 Field Experience, *tragically lies in the midst of a raging war between the races*. There are two primary groups of parents, *Latino and African American*. The parents do not like each other. They had *prejudices and stuff* and *didn't get along very well*. According to Kendra, the *ongoing conflict trickles down into their children* causing *conflicts* at school between the *races*. While at [Southside Elementary] school, Kendra became aware of the conflict and views it was a *rather large barrier* that *prevents* community and parental involvement at the school.

Students with Disabilities

In this study, students with disabilities are students who have been officially identified as learning disabled and receive special services to meet their educational needs. Kendra's perception of students with disabilities was awareness and acknowledgement. Kendra only

became aware of students with disabilities after entering the Middle School Program. Kendra was aware of the number of [Southside Elementary] students who were enrolled in special programs—15.2% of students were enrolled in *ESOL classes* and 7.9% were enrolled in the *gifted program*.

Nevertheless, Kendra acknowledged the role of the teacher who might have special education students in her class. Kendra indicated that *caring* for students includes being aware of students who are *disabled* or have *handicaps*, and *compensating* for them in the classroom. In this statement, Kendra professed an intent to address the needs of students with disabilities in her teaching practice.

Students with Varying Abilities

The varying abilities of students serve as distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities. Kendra was aware of students with varying abilities before entering the Middle School Program. As a student in school, Kendra was *pulled out for accelerated classes*. She was aware of the *varying mix of ability levels*. Kendra was aware that she was in the *high track*.

Once in the Middle School Program, Kendra's perception changed from awareness to acknowledgement. After completing her Shadow Study, Kendra acknowledged that she needed to make an *extra effort* to *refrain* from making *initial judgments* about people. Kendra realized that *first impressions* were not always correct impressions through getting to know Tom.

Transience Patterns

In this study, transience patterns refer to patterns of relocation or moving from one place to another. Kendra's perception of transience patterns was awareness. Kendra's family was transient because her father was in the military. Kendra lived in Japan, England, South Dakota,

Georgia, and Illinois. Kendra is aware that she has *moved around a lot*. As a result of her family's frequent moves, Kendra learned to *fit in wherever*.

Kendra was aware of transience patterns when interacting with students and families at [Southside Elementary] school. She wrote about *foreigners who have moved to a land of opportunity in hopes of a better life*. The *foreigners* were Spanish immigrants. And in [Southside Elementary] school, they were greeted with animosity from their *African American* neighbors.

Tom, the focus of Kendra's Shadow Study, had very different transience patterns than Kendra did. Kendra remarked that she *moved around a lot* and had *opportunity to travel*. Tom, however, has lived in the *same place* in Georgia *all* of his life. Kendra was aware of this difference.

Religion

In this study, religion is a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities. Kendra's perception of religion occurred at the awareness level. During her required Preprofessional Experience, Kendra was aware that she was working at a *Christian* YMCA camp. However, Kendra learned that the girls had *different religious backgrounds*—some of the girls were *Jewish* and others were *Catholic*. Beyond that, Kendra was not aware of the religious backgrounds of the students with whom she interacted. However, Kendra is aware that it is her *calling* to be a teacher. As a teacher, Kendra will be able to *make a difference* in the life of a child.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented narratives of each of the four participants in the study. Each narrative was followed by an analysis of the narrative. These analyses included a presentation of the participants' perception of background differences and similarities, identified distinguishing

characteristics of background differences and similarities, and how participants' perception influenced her teaching practice. In Chapter 5, I will present a discussion of perception, distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities, and implications from this study.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND FINAL THOUGHTS

In this study, I was seeking an answer to this research question: How do preservice teachers' perceptions of background differences and similarities evolve in the context (prior to and during) of a middle level teacher preparation program? In this chapter, I present a discussion of perceptions and background differences and similarities followed by the "restorying." The chapter will conclude with study implications and future research.

Perceptions of Background Differences and Similarities

Perception

Perception is a term generally considered synonymous with beliefs. However, several other terms are also used interchangeably in the literature, such as, attitudes, values, opinions, ideology, and dispositions. Prior to this study, I defined perception as understandings, awareness, or insights regarding a particular phenomenon. Based upon findings of this study, perception now refers to the awareness (conscious recognition), acknowledgement (professed intent to address background difference and similarities in teaching practice), and action (address background differences and similarities in teaching practice) of background differences and similarities.

As I was telling the stories and conducting analyses, the choice of words and phrases Jayne, Emma, Sarah, and Kendra used were purposeful. For example, participants *remembered*, *believed*, *opened my eyes*, *raised my awareness*, *enjoyed*, *need to know*, *experienced*, *affected*, *influenced*, *gained exposure*, *never were exposed*, *must take the difference among students into*

account, get to know students, make accommodations, becoming more familiar, very fortunate, develop relationships, feels a personal responsibility for students, need to be very careful, had to communicate, using a lot of hand motions, pronounced my words, and use a lot of visuals. To me, these words indicated three distinct levels of their perceptions of background differences and similarities.

For the awareness level, words and phrases were used such as *remembered, believed, opened my eyes, raised my awareness, enjoyed, experienced, affected, influenced, gained exposure, never were exposed, and very fortunate.* For acknowledgement, the four preservice teachers used words and phrases such as *must take the differences among students into account, get to know students, make accommodations, becoming more familiar, develop relationships, feels a personal responsibility for students, and need to be very careful.* For action, evident only once in this study, a participant used phrases such as *had to communicate, using a lot of hand motions, pronounced my words, and use a lot of visuals.*

While identification of words and phrases was an important part of the analysis, they did not tell the whole story. In narrative inquiry, life stories are told. Narrative researchers have to be mindful that stories are not picked apart word-by-word. Therefore, it was important for me to understand the context of the stories that were being told—I had to read around the words.

The following 12 tables show the evolution of each participant's perceptions of the distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities. Each table contains the three levels of perception—awareness, acknowledgement, and action. Within each table, the time when the perceptions occurred has been identified—prior to represents the time before the participants entered the Middle School Program and MSP represents time since participants have

been in the program. These 12 tables depict the evolution of my four participants' perceptions of background differences and similarities.

Table 8

Perception of Familial Support

Familial Support	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	Prior to & MSP		
Sarah	Prior to & MSP	MSP	
Emma	Prior to & MSP	MSP	
Kendra	Prior to & MSP		

Table 9

Perception of Familial Structure

Familial Structure	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	Prior to & MSP	MSP	
Sarah	Prior to & MSP	MSP	
Emma	Prior to & MSP		
Kendra	Prior to & MSP		

Table 10

Perception of Religion

Religion	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	Prior to	MSP	
Sarah	Prior to & MSP		
Emma	Prior to	MSP	
Kendra	Prior to & MSP		

Table 11

Perception of Home Localities

Home Localities	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	Prior to & MSP		
Sarah	Prior to & MSP		
Emma	Prior to & MSP		
Kendra	MSP		

Table 12

Perception of Transience Patterns

Transience Patterns	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	Prior to & MSP		
Sarah	Prior to & MSP		
Emma	Prior to & MSP		
Kendra	Prior to & MSP		

Table 13

Perception of Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic Status	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	Prior to & MSP		
Sarah	Prior to & MSP	MSP	
Emma	Prior to & MSP		
Kendra	Prior to & MSP		

Table 14

Perception of Language

Language	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	Prior to & MSP		
Sarah	MSP		
Emma	MSP		
Kendra	Prior to & MSP		MSP

Table 15

Perception of Gender

Gender	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	MSP		
Sarah	MSP		
Emma	MSP		
Kendra	MSP		

Table 16

Perception of Students with Disabilities

Students with Disabilities	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	Prior to & MSP	MSP	
Sarah			
Emma	MSP		
Kendra	Prior to & MSP		

Table 17

Perception of Students with Varying Abilities

Students with Varying Abilities	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	MSP	MSP	
Sarah	MSP	MSP	
Emma	MSP	MSP	
Kendra	Prior to	MSP	

Table 18

Perception of Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	Prior to & MSP	MSP	
Sarah	Prior to & MSP		
Emma	Prior to & MSP	MSP	
Kendra	Prior to & MSP	MSP	

Table 19

Perception of Culture

Culture	Aware	Acknowledge	Action
Jayne	Prior to & MSP	MSP	
Sarah	MSP		
Emma	MSP		
Kendra	MSP		

Summary

Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra were aware of background differences and similarities in 33 of 48 instances (69%) prior to their participation in the MSP. However, their perception of background differences and similarities evolved during the MSP to the awareness level as evidenced in 44 of 48 instances (92%). For acknowledgement of background differences and similarities, 16 of 48 (33%) instances occurred during the MSP. Finally, only 1 of 48 instances (2%) of action (Kendra) occurred during participation in the MSP.

Background Differences and Similarities

In Chapter 1, I defined background difference as those distinguishing characteristics which are a part of every person. Prior to the study I had identified five distinguishing characteristics: language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns, and familial structure. Based upon findings of this study, I changed background difference to background differences and similarities. Throughout the analysis process, I realized that my participants were not only identifying distinguishing characteristics of background difference, but of differences (plural) and of similarities between themselves and the students with whom they interacted. My original conception of background difference as an overarching construct did not match the

perceptions of the participants. Each distinguishing characteristic (i.e., language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns, and familial structure) operated as its own form of background difference, but, when taken together formed background differences and background similarities. In addition, I have now added seven more distinguishing characteristics to my list: religion, culture, gender, students with disabilities, students with varying abilities, home localities, and familial support—another result of the narratives.

Restorying: Aware, Acknowledge, and Action

In narrative inquiry, restorying is the final stage. Restorying includes reading the transcript, writing the story, analyzing the story to understand the lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and then retelling the story. In this section, I present the restory of four preservice teachers' perceptions (awareness of, acknowledgement about, action regarding) of background differences and similarities. The restory will be told within the context of the 12 distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities identified in this study along with relevant literature. The following table presents the definitions of the distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities as defined by the four participants and the narrative researcher.

Table 20

Definitions of Distinguishing Characteristics of BDS

Distinguishing Characteristic	Definition
Familial Support	The ways (e.g., motivating, encouraging, assisting) in which various members of a family are either positively or negatively involved in each other's lives.
Familial Structure	The type of family to which a person belongs, such as one-parent, two-parent, foster, blended, and divorced.
Religion	The self-identified religious affiliation of a person (e.g., Catholic, Christian, Baptist, Episcopalian).

Table 20 *continued*

Distinguishing Characteristic	Definition
Home Localities	The geographic region where a person lives, such as urban, suburban, or rural.
Transience Patterns	The patterns of relocation or moving from one place to another.
Socioeconomic Status	The social or economic background of a person which is associated with their family income level.
Language	The form of verbal communication used by people (e.g., English, Spanish, French, Chinese).
Gender	The sex of a person, either male or female.
Students with Disabilities	Students who have been officially identified as learning disabled and receive special services to meet their educational needs.
Students with Varying Abilities	The wide range of students' academic levels and cognitive abilities.
Ethnicity	The ethnic background of a person (e.g., Asian American, African American, American Indian, Latino) and the characteristics that define that group.
Culture	The range of behaviors, attitudes, customs, beliefs, and interactions of people.

Distinguishing characteristic: Family support

As Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra began telling stories about their lives as they were growing up, all four of them immediately began sharing information about their families. They all were aware they had *supportive families* and *home environments*. Their parents encouraged them to do their best in school and in various ways made their expectations of high academic achievement clear. Perhaps their parents knew (or hoped), long before their daughters did, that each one was going to attend college. Although described a bit differently, each one talked similarly about growing up in loving, stable homes. Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra were aware of the importance of family. Sarah was aware of being *very fortunate* to have *stability* when she was growing up. Emma was aware of being *lucky* to have grown up in such a *loving environment*.

Through their interactions with young adolescents while in the middle school program, Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra raised their awareness of familial support and how different that support might be from their own personal experiences. They became aware of the fact that familial support is not found in all households. For example, after continually helping Mary (Jayne's Shadow Study student) with homework and assignments she did not understand, Jayne became aware of the fact that Mary's parents did not provide time or offer to help her with her homework. This situation was totally different from what Jayne experienced as a student. Jayne was *lectured and grounded* if her work was not completed.

Sarah became aware that not all children and young adolescents want to go home. In fact, one of the girls Sarah mentored rarely wanted to go home. The girl shared random bits of information that made Sarah aware of the girl's home life. The mother's boyfriend and many of her siblings were home more often than the mother. Sarah shared her thoughts about the mentee's lack of familial support with her own mother, a teacher. Her mother explained to Sarah that "*This happens all of the time.*" Sarah's awareness level regarding familial structure skyrocketed after this experience in her preprofessional experience. In addition, Sarah acknowledged that the *best thing* she can do as a teacher is to *just be a friend*. Sarah believes that students who are not from a *secure and stable environment* have a difficult school experience because they lack *structure*. Sarah acknowledged that *everyone comes from a different place* and she will have to make adjustments in her teaching practice for these places.

During her Preprofessional Experience, Emma acknowledged that she learned how to *be a mother and a teacher at the same time*. As a camp counselor, Emma was surrounded by girls 24 hours a day. She had to fill whatever role they needed. Emma also identified a *teacher is like a mother* in her Teaching Metaphor. Emma acknowledged that like mothers, teachers *have to*

care for their students, take interest in their learning, know their strengths and weaknesses. To her, teaching is mothering.

According to Jackson and Davis (2000), relationships with parents and caregivers serve as “both an anchor and an audience for the child’s intellectual voyages” (p. 122). Familial support provides a foundation for intellectual development. Young adolescents who belong to supportive families tend to become good citizens. Young adolescents need to belong—they want to feel cared for, accepted, and respected (Chamberlain, 2003). By having close relationships with parents and caregivers, young adolescents build connections and develop a sense of belonging. The four participants in this study were all aware that their family supported them growing up. It was not until they were in the MSP that they consciously recognized—became aware of—varying degrees of parental support, and only two participants acknowledged familial support in the school setting. Even so, none of the four progressed to taking action regarding familial support in their teaching.

Distinguishing Characteristic: Family Structure

While their levels of familial support were similar to each other, their familial structures differed. Jayne came from a divorced home while the other three had both biological parents. And, Jayne’s biological father died during her freshman year at The University of Georgia. Sarah’s parents had been *married forever*. Emma had a *close knit family with two wonderful parents*. Kendra’s family was *pretty close* and her parents are *still married*. All four participants had siblings. Sarah and Kendra were middle children. Jayne was the oldest child and Emma was the youngest.

When Sarah found out that the majority of students in her EDMS 5020 Field Experience class came from *two-parent families* she expressed *surprise*. Her experiences mentoring and

tutoring students in local urban elementary schools had led her to believe that this type of family was rare today. Sarah, as a result of her MSP experiences, acknowledged familial structure. She said *that you are not just a teacher, you are so many other things...a parent*. Jayne acknowledged that familial structure affects students. Emma and Kendra, however, continued to stay at the awareness level regarding familial structures.

Distinguishing Characteristic: Religion

Religious beliefs were influential in the lives of the four participants. Jayne was Baptist. Sarah was Episcopalian. Kendra and Emma were non-denominational Christians. Sarah and Emma talked about being involved in their churches. Sarah was *required* to attend church every Sunday whereas Emma volunteered in several religious programs and was frequently at church.

While Emma was *very vocal* about her *faith*, religion was a topic of minimal discussion for Jayne, Sarah, and Kendra. Emma explained that the *freedom* to share her beliefs and work in a school that would not have *consequences* for doing that was extremely important to her. According to Emma, her ideal classroom would consist of students who were on or near the same level of religious belief as she and were from the same denomination. Emma acknowledged the role religion might play in a lesson plan comparing the attack on Pearl Harbor with the attack on September 11.

Jayne had her first experience with a *Muslim* student during her EDMS 5020 Field Experience. According to her, it was a *very interesting* experience. Jayne acknowledged the need for a teacher to be *familiar* with students' religious beliefs so that they *don't mess* them up. Sarah and Kendra both stayed at the awareness level in regards to religion even after their experiences in MSP.

Distinguishing Characteristics: Home Localities and Transience Patterns

Jayne, Sarah, and Emma all moved approximately 100 miles from home to attend The University of Georgia. These locally raised women described their hometowns fondly. Both Jayne and Sarah grew up in rural communities. Emma grew up in a suburb of Atlanta. Kendra, on the other hand, had no hometown to claim. As a child in a military family, she moved with the family when the order to do so arrived. Kendra had lived both inside and outside the United States.

Jayne, Emma, and Sarah were aware of the home localities of the students with whom they interacted when completing their EDMS 5020 Field Experience. Jayne and Sarah were engaged in meaningful activities with students in home localities different from their *rural* experience. Their schools were in urban areas. Also, Emma interacted with students who lived in rural communities, almost the opposite of her suburban upbringing.

In this study, transience patterns are considered the patterns of relocation or moving from one place to another. Only one of the participants, Kendra, moved frequently as a child. She lived in three different states and three different countries during her schooling years. Emma lived in two different states, but that was before she entered school. The transience patterns of the participants match the literature. Jayne, Emma, and Sarah were *locally raised* (Hodgkinson, 2002; Sleeter, 2001; Zimpher & Ashburn, 1992). According to Terrill and Mark (2000), the majority of preservice teachers select their college or university due to its proximity to their homes. All four of the participant's families now live within the state of Georgia.

Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra were aware of the transience patterns of their Shadow Study students. Jayne was aware of the fact that, like her, Mary grew up living close to the school she attended. John (Sarah's Shadow Study Student) had relocated to the United States

from the Philippines as a young child. Emma was aware of the differences between her transience patterns and that of Adam. Adam had grown up in the *same county all his life*. Kendra mentioned that Tom has lived in the *same place in Georgia all his life*. In addition, Kendra was aware of the transience patterns of several other students in her EDMS 5020 Field Experience class—they were *immigrants* (from Mexico).

Distinguishing Characteristic: Socioeconomic Status, Language, and Gender

All four participants were aware of being from middle class families—that was how they identified themselves. In addition, these middle class, White, women spoke English, had English-speaking friends, and recalled learning a foreign language at some point in their lives, but were unable to use the language they had learned.

Socioeconomic status proved to be a line of demarcation for the participants in this study. When identifying their socioeconomic statuses, the four participants identified themselves to be middle class or better. Yet, when they identified the socioeconomic statuses of the majority of young adolescents with whom they interacted, the young adolescents were *different* and were most often depicted as *lower class* or at least lower class than the participants.

Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra viewed themselves differently than their students in regard to socioeconomic status. They created an “us” and “them” notion of background differences and similarities. This situation is similar to one that Neuharth-Pritchett, Reiff, and Pearson (2001) found when they investigated preservice teacher’s knowledge of multicultural education and diversity. Their students displayed a tendency to negatively stereotype the students with whom they interacted. Jayne and Sarah assumed that the socioeconomic status of their students followed a negative (at least to them) pattern. Their identification of students as

belonging to the lower class socioeconomic group was a simple statement of fact but also a large difference between themselves and the students.

Kendra and Emma identified the overall number of students in their field experience schools who qualified for free or reduced lunch prices. Through these generalizations, Kendra and Emma were able to document the socioeconomic level of the entire school population. It would make sense, then, that at least a portion of their students would fall into the free or reduced lunch recipient category. Through the inclusion of the free or reduced lunch numbers, Emma and Kendra attempted to validate the socioeconomic status of their schools and tried to base their socioeconomic status placement of students on a service all schools provide for their students.

Through her Preprofessional Experience, Sarah tutored *underprivileged students*. During this experience, she became aware of many of the students' socioeconomic status. She felt a responsibility to do something to improve each student's situation. However, she acknowledged that her role was not to help the students *financially*. With this acknowledgement, Sarah felt less guilty about her own background and was free to openly respond to each student without feeling bad for not being able to help each one.

The range of situations Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra experienced in the MSP regarding language resulted in raised awareness and greater understanding of the needs of English as Second Language Learners. Each of them became aware of their limited ability to communicate with students who did not speak English. This inability to communicate served as a source of frustration for them; they desired to have effective communication with all students in their classes—not just English speakers. Specifically, Kendra and Sarah regretted not learning a foreign language or remembering the language they had learned. In some respects, this reiterates

Xu's (2000) finding that the majority of preservice teachers respond positively to differences between themselves and students. It would seem that their frustration and desire to communicate would be a positive response to the differences between themselves and students. And, like the preservice teachers in Xu's study, Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra were making "efforts to begin a journey toward culturally responsive teaching" (p. 141).

Although Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra were aware of the gender of the students with whom they interacted, other than the random identification of the gender of students (e.g. Mary being female or Tom being male), minimal mention of gender occurred. Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra were aware of the class as a whole (e.g. every student, all students), but seemed to be unaware of the influence gender differences could have or did have in their classes.

Distinguishing Characteristic: Students with Disabilities and Varying Abilities

Having had limited experiences with students with disabilities and students with varying abilities, Emma and Sarah made no mention of these characteristics while they were growing up. However, Jayne's mother was a special education teacher so Jayne was made aware of those students. In high school, Kendra was tracked—she was in the high track and was frequently pulled out of her regular classes to receive special instruction.

Once in the Middle School Program, Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra all had some type of interaction with either students with disabilities or students with varying abilities. Whether tutoring, mentoring, shadowing, completing a required field experience, or substitute teaching, they worked with a wide variety of students. All of the participants acknowledged the need to individualize instruction so that each student in their class would learn in a productive manner. Jayne acknowledged that she would be able to *interact more successfully* by getting to know each student personally. Jayne acknowledged that in her teaching practice she would *make*

adjustments for individuality. Sarah's awareness that *all* students learn at *different* rates led to her acknowledgement that *each student is different* and *plans to form an encouraging and upbeat* classroom climate where *every student is able to learn*. Emma has learned that teachers need to be *sensitive* to the varied learning needs of their students. Emma acknowledged that in her class she will focus on *every student as an individual and incorporate each child's interest* in her teaching practice. Kendra acknowledged her need to refrain from making initial judgments about students—she learned with Tom that her initial judgments were not always correct.

Gersten, Baker, Pugach, Scanlon, and Chard (2001) noted that ethnic and cultural issues have a long, bleak, and inequitable history in special education practices. Instructional research that directly studies minority children with disabilities is rare (Gersten & Baker, 2000). When researchers attempt to study students with disabilities who have varying background characteristics, they experience difficulty determining what has greater influence over the students—their disability, their ethnicity, their language status, their socioeconomic status, etc. Thus, when examining BDS with my participants, it is no wonder that three of the four were either unaware or unconcerned about students with disabilities; more than likely they have yet to encounter relevant research focusing on students with disabilities and BDS.

Distinguishing Characteristic: Ethnicity and Culture

In this study, ethnicity refers to the ethnic background of a person (e.g., Asian-American, African-American, American Indian, European-American, Latino, etc.) and the characteristics that define that group. Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra are White preservice teachers. They identified the majority of their friends in high school as being *like them*. Sarah directly admitted to having limited academic and social interactions with people different from her.

Jayne, Emma, Sarah, and Kendra were aware of the ethnicity of their students and the labels of ethnicity came easily and frequently. They identified students as either being *Black*, *White*, *Mexican*, *Caucasian*, *African American*, *Hispanic*, *Latino*, or *Filipino*. Rarely, with the exception of one instance for Jayne and Emma, did they talk specifically about the needs, backgrounds, experiences, or culture of these *Black*, *White*, *Mexican*, *Caucasian*, *African American*, *Hispanic*, *Latino*, and *Filipino* students. Jayne acknowledged ethnicity and made the statement that background differences and similarities goes [sic] *beyond the color of skin*. She elaborated and said *when she plans her lessons she must take the [ethnic] differences into consideration and explore their backgrounds*. Emma also acknowledged ethnicity and expressed a desire to approach ethnicity carefully as she planned her lessons.

Sarah said that *you can't tell anything about a child's personality by looking at them* [sic]. As Kendra established relationships with the students she worked with in the after-school program, she *forgot their color*. These admissions document that all of the participants in this study acknowledged the effect of ethnicity since being in the Middle School Program, but had not progressed to the action level. Jayne, Emma, Sarah and Kendra, as a result of their participation in the MSP, may have experienced a small “gestalt shift” (Nespor, 1987, p. 321) in their belief systems regarding ethnicity.

The perceptions of the four participants were similar to findings of Au and Blake (2003). Au and Blake found that preservice teachers tended to focus on instruction first and cultural characteristics (a distinguishing characteristic of background differences and similarities) second. Au and Blake examined issues related to “social class, ethnicity, and primary language” (p. 192). Delivering instruction in meaningful ways was of utmost importance to my participants. After spending large amounts of time deliberating over what to teach and how to teach it, my

participants, although aware, seemed to forget about the ethnicity of the students or that these ethnicities might influence their learning and interaction patterns in the class.

Culture was most often perceived at the awareness level. Only Jayne indicated awareness of culture before entering the middle school program. She was aware of the *KKK* influence in her home community as well as the differences between American and French cultures through her participation in her high school French Exchange. After being in the program, Jayne became aware of cultural differences among the students with whom she interacted. According to her they had different attitudes toward school, different interaction patterns, and different ways of communicating than she did. Jayne acknowledged that she could use the *cultural differences* among her students to teach about *different cultures*.

Sarah also was aware of culture after being in the middle school program. John, the focus of her Shadow Study, was Filipino. She learned how cultural barriers influence student behaviors, interactions, and relationships. Finally, Kendra developed awareness of cultural differences through her work in the After-School Program and in her EDMS 5020 Field Experience class. Kendra's students were much more worldly than she and were influenced by their parents' prejudice toward other ethnic groups (e.g., African American and Hispanic). Kendra was aware of the effect that the culture of family has on student behaviors, interactions, and relationships.

Summary

One of the primary components of this study was the evolution of preservice teachers' perceptions of background differences and similarities. In the telling of their stories, analyses of their narratives, and in the restorying presented here in Chapter 5, I believe that it is evident that the perceptions of Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra definitely evolved. The majority of

perceptions occurred at the awareness level and were often after being in the Middle School Program. Acknowledgement, which occurred less frequently than awareness, happened after being involved in experiences related to the Middle School Program. Finally, action was only taken once in this study. Kendra took action during her EDMS 5020 Field Experience. This evidence documents the fact that Jayne's Sarah's, Emma's, and Kendra's perceptions did evolve during their first year in the Middle School Program.

Study Implications

Students and Teachers: A Community of Individuals

A middle school classroom is a community of individuals. Each person (students and teacher) is unique with respect to their backgrounds. These background differences and similarities ought to be taken into account during schooling. While it is important for teachers to recognize individual differences and similarities, it is equally important for teachers to view the class as a whole--as a community of individuals. I believe that a middle school program ought to help the perceptions of preservice teachers evolve from awareness of BDS to acknowledgement and into action. As the narrative researcher examining all of the data related to this study, I learned that this was important to the participants as well. Each of the participants wanted to have a community established in their own classrooms. I was not surprised that Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra were primarily at the awareness level regarding the distinguishing characteristics of background differences and similarities of their students. Even so, they had a desire to establish an environment where all students in the class were valued, respected, and accepted for who they are. At the beginning of the study, background differences were distinguishing characteristics that served to separate preservice teachers from their students. However, as the study progressed, background differences and similarities became distinguishing

characteristics that served as identifiers of various students that when brought together formed a community of individuals.

Preservice Teacher Preparation Programs

Regardless of the university affiliation, preservice teacher preparation programs carry a major responsibility—educating future teachers. In fact, for over twenty years, teacher educators have been calling for the specialized preparation of preservice teachers for various educational settings, e.g., urban, suburban, or rural schools, and a variety of students, e.g., ethnically, socioeconomically, linguistically diverse (Zeichner, 1992). And, for over twenty years, teacher educators have known that preservice teachers and students are becoming less and less similar. Preservice teachers are primarily White, female, and middle class. Students in schools are not (Zeichner, 1992).

As can be seen in the review of the literature, teacher educators have engaged in their own studies to try to determine what effective practices are necessary for preservice teachers to teach and to interact with students from various backgrounds. However, what can not be seen in the review of the literature is one method that works in all preservice teacher preparation programs. Perhaps there is not one method, but several options. Whatever option is taken, however, it should lead to action by the preservice teachers regarding BDS.

Advice from Study Participants

To me, as a future teacher educator, one of the most important aspects of this study was to hear Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra discuss ways to improve their Middle School Program. I believe their suggestions are vital to the success of the program—who better to offer advice than people experiencing the Middle School Program? They offer this advice:

More field experience. All four participants in this study emphatically stated that field experiences were critical to helping them understand the students and the complexities of teaching. Their advice was to have continuous face-to-face interaction with young adolescents. In the current program they have a field experience the fall of the junior year. The spring of their junior year they take content methods classes which have no formal attached field experiences. They believe that as they are gaining content knowledge, they should gain practical experiences related to that knowledge. For example, Jayne stated that in her math methods class, she could have had practical experiences with young adolescents that allowing her to apply what she had learned. They want a field experience each semester they are in the program. Essentially, they do not care whether this field experience occurs as a MSP requirement or in conjunction with their content area courses; they just recognized the fact that they need more field experience.

More opportunity for reflection. Within the MSP, preservice teachers are given numerous opportunities to reflect on different aspects of the teaching profession. However, Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra want the opportunity for more reflection and discussion related to background differences and similarities. They suggested more time be given in class for discussions of experiences with young adolescents who have backgrounds different from or similar to their own. Journal writing, reading and discussing relevant literature were also suggestions that could provide a context for their learning.

Make community involvement opportunities common knowledge. Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra all stated that if they were more aware of community involvement opportunities, they would be more likely to become involved. They suggested that the Middle School Program have a list of options available for preservice teachers. Thus, if they desire to volunteer or

become involved in the community, their options for volunteering or involvement are at their fingertips. Now, this information is available on the Middle School Program website.

Foreign language. According to Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra preservice teachers should be strongly encouraged to become proficient in a foreign language. Although they identified Spanish as the language most useful, they did not think it would be just or fair to require one specific language. Each of them had learned a foreign language at some point in their academic careers, but they were not proficient. Simple or random knowledge was, in their minds, not enough. Proficiency ought to be the goal.

Exceptional role models in instructors and professors. Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra stated that the instructors and professors that teach their classes—either MSP courses or content area classes—should be exceptional role models. Their instructors and professors ought to be people they want to imitate. These exceptional role models ought to use background differences and similarities in positive ways and not be biased. According to them, some instructors and professors teach in a biased way, based on their own backgrounds, and are not using background differences and similarities in a productive manner.

Reevaluate courses and teacher educators. Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra claim that students have the same problems with curriculum and teacher educators semester after semester. Thus, they recommend that courses—content and teacher educators—be reevaluated to effectively meet the needs of the students, including addressing BDS. The continual reevaluation of course content ought to ensure that all needed material is being provided, unnecessary repetition does not take place, and time is allotted to BDS. Likewise, continual evaluation of teacher educators should occur so that the students are being taught by the best of the best. They

believe that like public school teachers, teacher educators need to be held accountable for how and what they teach.

Advice from the Instructor/Researcher

Based upon my experiences as an instructor of EDMS 5020 and as the narrative researcher in this study, I agree with the majority of the participants' advice. Continuous field experiences will give preservice teachers more opportunity to engage in meaningful activities with young adolescents from various backgrounds. However, demographics for the counties and schools where the MSP places preservice teachers for field experiences ought to be shared with them. Preservice teachers' notions of urban, suburban and rural communities might conflict with the MSP classifications of urban, suburban and rural. These experiences are essential to effective teacher preparation. Opportunities for reflection are key to personal and professional growth and the development of personal practical knowledge. I believe that as teacher educators, we provide time for reflection, but we often dictate the reflection topics. Perhaps guidance or suggestions for reflection would be more powerful than dictation—preservice teachers could then reflect on their concerns, questions, or epiphanies. In addition, reflection that focuses solely on background differences and similarities of students ought to occur. Journal writing, thoughtful discussion, and reading relevant literature would also be of benefit to developing an understanding of background differences and similarities.

According to Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra proficiency in a second language would be beneficial to preservice teachers. The ability to communicate with a variety of students ought to make them better teachers of all students. I agree with this. I also agree that one particular language should not be required. Preservice teachers ought to have some control over their language choice.

With regard to programmatic issues such as providing exceptional role models, reevaluating courses and teachers and making volunteer or community involvement opportunities easily accessible I agree with participants, but also think that some things are beyond the control of the Middle School Program. Of course, we, in the Middle School Program, want exceptional role models for preservice teachers. Of course, the Middle School Program wants its preservice teachers to be taught by instructors and professors who will use background differences and similarities in productive ways. Of course, volunteer or community involvement opportunities should be easily accessible. We hope that the best teacher educators are provided, but we can not determine who teaches in other departments. With regard to volunteer or community involvement opportunities, preservice teachers should take the initiative—and find places to become involved. At some point this involvement needs to not be a requirement, but instead be seen as a personal responsibility.

Having taught EDMS 5020 and been the narrative researcher leading this inquiry, I believe that some adjustments ought to be made in the program. First, all preservice teachers in the Middle School Program need to have one of their field experiences in a setting distinctly different from their own background. Our preservice teachers need to be in settings where the students will be different and yet similar to them. I believe that this distinctly different experience should occur early in the program—their first field experience, if possible. By engaging preservice teachers in meaningful activities with young adolescents of varying backgrounds, a context would be available for the reflection, discussion, and readings that would focus on background differences and similarities.

The EDMS 5020 course assignments that were most beneficial to the preservice teachers were the Shadow Study, Original and Revised Philosophies of Education, and the Letter of

Introduction to the Mentor Teacher. Jayne, Sarah, Emma, and Kendra identified these activities as the ones that made them think most deeply about background differences and similarities related to teaching. Before the EDMS 5020 coursework, the Preprofessional Experience and EPSY 2020 Field Experience were identified as most beneficial to the development of their perception of background differences and similarities. These required experiences forced them to engage in activities that were out of their normal level of comfort, and they learned that the differences were not such an issue.

As one of the EDMS 5020 course instructors, I regret having their Reflective Journal so rigidly focused on aspects of teaching. As an instructor, I hoped that the identification of issues related to teaching would expand and include issues with students. This did not happen in many cases. I would have two field journals if I were to teach this class again; one for issues related to teaching practice and the other for issues related to students and BDS.

Future Research

Although this study was extensive in its purpose, analysis, and conclusions, teacher educators, preservice teachers, in-service teachers, and young adolescents could benefit from further research in the area of perceptions and background differences and similarities. First, the opportunity to continue this work with current participants as they progress through the middle school program and into their careers as teachers to determine if or how the instruction and experiences provided resulted in awareness, acknowledgement, or action regarding background differences and similarities would be key. Identifying their awareness, acknowledgement, and action through their final year in the MSP ought to enhance teacher educators' perceptions of BDS and ought to improve instructional practices for future preservice teachers. Further, the continuation of this study into the participants' first years of teaching ought to illuminate how

effectively the preservice teacher education program prepared them for the background differences and similarities of young adolescents in the classroom. Second, conducting a similar study with preservice teachers of varying gender and ethnicity could prove to yield different results. This study would provide comparative data that would enable teacher educators to ensure that best practices are being used across the board—for all preservice teachers.

In addition to conducting a longitudinal study and repeating this study in a different environment, the investigation of beginning and veteran teachers' perceptions of background differences and similarities to determine if length of practice influences their perceptions of background differences and similarities would be informative. Perhaps length of experience determines how a teacher interacts with students different from them. If length of time in practice is a strong influence on the interaction between teachers and students with backgrounds different from their own, then further investigation of the beginning and veteran teachers' practice would be crucial. Comparing the practice of beginning and veteran teachers, contrasting the practice, and identifying the types of commonalities and differences would be important. Learning from both beginning and veteran teachers ought to enhance teacher education overall.

While learning about teachers—at all stages of development—is essential in understanding teaching practices, especially related to BDS, learning about young adolescent perceptions' of BDS is also essential. What and how young adolescents think about background differences and similarities ought to be important to know. Because young adolescents are the people teacher educators are preparing preservice teachers to teach, understanding young adolescent perceptions of background differences and similarities and how background differences and similarities influence their interactions with teachers and peers ought to be enlightening. Perhaps BDS is not an issue in their lives or perhaps it is. If BDS is an issue, how

does it affect their interactions—and how can we, as teacher educators, teach about BDS in meaningful and effective ways?

Finally, the discovery of professors' perceptions of background differences and similarities and how background differences and similarities influence their teaching, interactions with colleagues, and interactions with students is critical. The participants in this study indicated that they had had enough of professors telling them how to do something, but not modeling the behavior themselves. Preservice teachers are looking for strong models to align with and emulate. Through the discovery of professors' (e.g., teacher educators') perceptions of background differences and similarities, adjustments and adaptations in teaching practices or professional interactions could be warranted. If this were the case, and adjustments and adaptations were made, preservice teachers would then have role models to follow and real-life examples of teacher educators who are aware of, who acknowledge, and who take action with regard to background differences and similarities. The personal practical knowledge of both teacher educators and preservice teachers ought to grow through this line of research.

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APPENDIX A

PREPROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Preprofessional Experience Reflection Questions

1. Why did you choose this experience?
2. What community issue, concern, or need did this experience address? If none, explain.
3. In what ways were the groups you worked with or the settings you were in different from your own background?
4. How was this experience related to your interest in teaching young adolescents (ages 10-15) as a career?
5. What did you find most satisfying about your preprofessional experience and why?
6. What aspects of your experience did you find difficult and why?
7. How has your understanding of young adolescents, families, and communities changed as a result of this experience?
8. What have you learned about your own interests, needs, and concerns as a result of this experience?
9. What other insights or thoughts about this experience would you like to share?
10. Think of three main thoughts or ideas from your supervisor interview. What did you learn that might make a difference in your decision to become a middle level teacher?

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol #1

1. Describe your life and schooling experiences as you were growing up.
(Where did you grow up?; What schools did you attend?; What language is primarily spoken in your home? Describe your family; Did you move around as you were growing up?; What extra-curricular activities did you participate in? To what ethnic group do you belong?)
2. What does the phrase “background difference” mean to you? (diversity, cultural diversity, pluralism, acculturation, race, gender, ethnicity, language, SES, familial structure, transience patterns, religion?)
3. Prior to the program, in what ways did you interact with young adolescents who have backgrounds different from your own?
4. During the program, in what ways did you interact with young adolescents who have backgrounds different from your own?
5. Now, in what ways do you interact with young adolescents who have backgrounds different from your own?
6. What do you think the ideal classroom of students would be like?
7. Describe the students you actually taught during your field experience in EDMS 5020 (Ethnicity, Language, etc.).
8. Tell me your thoughts about the differences between you and the students from your EDMS 5020 field experience classroom.
9. Tell me your thoughts about the differences between the students themselves from your EDMS 5020 field experience classroom.
10. How has this field experience influence your thoughts about teaching?
11. Describe a memorable encounter you had with a young adolescent whose background is different from your own based on your EDMS 5020 field experience. (How was this experience different from other encounters you have had with students who are different from you?)
12. Some people would say that preservice teachers do not have enough life experience to positively interact with, accept, or be comfortable around students who have backgrounds different from their own. What would you say to this statement?

13. Would you say that teaching young adolescents is different from what you expected it to be?

14. Do you have any final comments to share?

Interview Protocol #2

Have artifacts displayed for each participant. Artifacts include preservice teacher generated items including preprofessional experience, reflective questions and follow-up questions, entrance essay, resume, original and revised philosophy of teaching, letter of introduction to mentor teacher, shadow study, lesson plans, and reflective field journal.

1. Tell me what this (artifact) represents to you.
2. Explain what you learned about your perceptions of student background difference through the construction of this artifact.
3. Ask individual questions about artifacts based on data analysis.
4. Please complete this assignment for the next interview: Construct a teaching metaphor (short story) that captures your perceptions about working with students from diverse backgrounds. We will use your teaching metaphor as the basis for the next interview.

Interview Protocol #3

1. Tell me about your teaching metaphor.
2. Background difference refers to those distinguishing characteristics of every person including language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, transience patterns, and familial structure. What aspects of your teaching metaphor, if any, relate to background difference?

3. Please complete this Venn diagram assignment for the focus group: Create a Venn diagram (two intersecting circles) indicating your background in one circle and the background (if known) of the adolescent in your student case study. Indicate in the overlapping section, those background characteristics that are similar to both of you.

Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. What are your perceptions of background difference?
2. How did the _____ influence your perceptions of background difference?

Preprofessional experience

Entrance Essay

Resume

Philosophy of Teaching

Letter of Introduction

Strengths Paper

Middle School Learners Chart

Shadow Study**

**Let's discuss each of your Venn Diagrams—

Jayne—

Emma—

Sarah—

Kendra—

Lesson Plans

Reflective Journal

Revised Philosophy

Teaching Strategy Summary

Classroom Guidance Plan

Final Examination

Resume

Follow-up Questions (Preprofessional Experience Questions about Field Experience)

Teaching Metaphors

3. In what other ways have you learned about background difference in your preservice teacher preparation program?
4. In what ways has your thinking about background difference evolved since being in the program?
5. In what ways are your perceptions of background difference important to you as a preservice teacher?
6. What suggestions do you have for teacher preparation programs to help preservice teachers come to know about background difference?
7. Do you have any final comments or anything else to share?

APPENDIX C
VENN DIAGRAM

Venn Diagram Example

