

## Exploring the Experiences of Award Winning Teachers in Counselor Education: A Qualitative Inquiry

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### Abstract

Using qualitative methods, the author engaged ten counselor educators who had previously been identified as excellent teachers in an examination of the experiences that contributed to their development as faculty in counselor education. Personal qualities of participants were explored and seven common themes emerged: (a) pride in teaching, (b) demonstrating care, (c) challenging students, (d) authenticity, (e) passion for teaching, (f) organization, and (g) creativity. Implications for these findings on teaching in higher education will be discussed.

**Key Words:** Qualitative Teaching, Education, Higher-ed Teaching, Counselor Education Teaching, Excellence in Teaching

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## Introduction

Teaching is a deeply held value for counselor educators. Nonetheless, counselor education programs have historically provided only minimal attention to preparing doctoral students to teach (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 1988; CACREP, 1994; CACREP, 2001; CACREP, 2009; Carter, Bowman, Kher, Jones, & Tollerud, 1994; Hall, 2007; Hoyt, 1986; Magnuson, 2002; Magnuson, Shaw, Tubin, & Norem, 2004; Magnuson, Black, & Lahaman, 2006; NAGPS, 2000; Tollerud, 1990). Further, little of the research in the field of counselor education addresses the way counselor educators are prepared to teach. Using qualitative methods, the researchers engaged counselor educators identified as excellent teachers to discover how they developed their craft. The author surmised that by exploring the experiences that prepared them to teach, excellent teacher provide the next generation of counselor educators with rich descriptive strategies for teacher preparation.

### Research Problem and Purpose of the Study

While teaching holds considerable value and importance within the field of counselor education, methods of preparing counselor educators to teach are still developing. At one point, teacher preparation was absent from the professional standards for doctoral training in counselor education. In 2009, CACREP added to the description of teacher preparation in its standards for doctoral training in counselor education. According to the standards, doctoral students must obtain knowledge of instructional theory in counselor education, develop a personal teaching and learning philosophy, and demonstrate skill at course design, delivery, and evaluation methods (CACREP, p. 56).

Prior to the 2009 CACREP standards, several authors described teacher preparation in counselor education as inadequate at helping advanced doctoral students learn to teach (Carter et al., 1994, p. 441; Hall, 2007, p. 17). Hall conducted a study to explore counselor educators' experiences during their doctoral training and the perceived effectiveness of those experiences in preparing them to teach. According to the findings of Hall's study, courses aimed at teacher training were deemed least helpful, while practicum experiences and teaching internships were deemed most helpful in preparing doctoral students to teach. Overall, participants reported a general dissatisfaction with the outcome of their teacher training during their doctoral programs. Other researchers have reported similar findings related to teacher preparation in counselor education including low self-efficacy related to teaching (Tollerud,

1990), limited formal coursework in college teaching (NAGST, 2001; Tollerud), few opportunities for practicum and internship experiences in teaching (Castellano, 2002; Tollerud), and a lack of mentoring and feedback from faculty related to teaching performance (Carter et al., 1994; Magnuson, 2002).

Research on improving teacher preparation in counselor education is limited, therefore recommendations are often drawn from the literature on teacher education. Many of these recommendations include regular mentoring, advising and feedback, diverse and developmentally oriented teaching opportunities, and regular opportunities for guided reflection (Austin, 2002a; 2002b; Meacham, 2002; Silverman, 2003). Meacham recommended preparation that included opportunities for mentoring, opportunities for future faculty to follow faculty through a typical day on campus, opportunities to participate in high-level graduate seminars and courses on college teaching, preparing a course syllabus and having it critiqued, being supervised in teaching, engaging in self-assessment and self-reflection as a teacher, and assembling a teaching portfolio. Silverman (2003) offered practical suggestions including taking courses in teaching, participating in a teaching practicum, and receiving mentoring. Specifically, Silverman advocated for courses that emphasize teaching methods, assessment and grading principles, ethics, and college student development. Austin (2002) conducted a four-year longitudinal qualitative study that examined the graduate experience of 79 doctoral students enrolled in two large doctoral granting institutions. Participants of Austin's (2002) study reported feeling ill prepared upon graduation for their role as faculty. They felt confused about what was expected of them and de-valued by college administrators, and believed that they received conflicting information during their doctoral training. She and her colleagues' suggested more attention be given to regular mentoring, advising and feedback, diverse and developmentally oriented teaching opportunities, and regular opportunities for guided reflection.

Despite reports that teacher preparation within counselor education is inadequate, there exist a number of excellent teachers in the field of counselor education, as evidenced by peer recognition in the form of awards and nominations. What can be learned from their reflections concerning how they developed as teachers in higher education? By reflecting on the experiences that prepared them to teach, excellent teachers may provide the next generation of faculty members with rich descriptive strategies for teacher preparation in counselor education. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to explore the development of counselor educators who have been recognized as excellent teachers.

### *Research Questions*

The following research questions were designed and used for the purpose of this study:

- What experiences contributed to the development of excellent teachers in counselor education, and how were those experiences were meaningful in preparing them to teach?
- How do excellent teachers in counselor education describe the early experiences that contributed to their development as teachers?
- How do excellent teachers in counselor education describe the doctoral training that contributed to their development as teachers?
- How do excellent teachers in counselor education describe the postgraduate school experiences that contributed to their development as teachers?
- What can we learn about teacher preparation in counselor education by exploring the meaningful experiences of excellent teachers in counselor education?

### Methods

Qualitative phenomenological methods were used to study how excellent teachers in counselor education develop as teachers. Several approaches exist for organizing and analyzing data in a phenomenological qualitative study. This study utilized a transcendental phenomenological approach. Based on principles identified by Husserl (1931), transcendental phenomenology focuses on the “meaningful” experiences of the phenomenon. The phenomenon was an exploration into the experiences that contributed to the development of excellent teachers in counselor education, and how those experiences were meaningful in preparing them to teach. Participants consisted of 10 counselor educators recognized for their excellence in teaching.

#### Participant Sampling, Recruitment, and Selection

##### *Participant sampling*

This study utilized purposeful participant sampling procedures. By definition, purposeful sampling is a non-random method of selecting information-rich cases for study (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Criterion sampling is a specific kind of purposeful sampling. It requires that participants meet the conditions related to the phenomenon to be

eligible to participate in the study (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas; Polkinghorne, 1989). For the purpose of this study, participant criteria were: (a) receipt of the Outstanding Professional Teaching Award, or (b) identification by department chairs as having the qualities of an excellent teacher.

### *Participant recruitment*

Potential participants for this study were identified in two ways: First, the ACES online newsletter was searched for the names of previous recipients of the Outstanding Professional Teacher Award. In addition, the researcher sent an inquiry on CES-Net, the online counselor education listserv, for any information on previous award winners. These methods generated a list of six names. Since 2000, the award for Outstanding Professional Teacher has been given out six times (i.e., 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2010).

The second way in which potential participants for this study were identified was by contacting department chairs of counselor education programs to nominate a faculty member from their department. Chairs were limited to the North Central region. Criteria for nominations to be considered included: (a) full-time faculty teaching in a CACREP accredited counselor education program; (b) excellent teacher evaluations; and (c) recognized award for teaching by the university or department. Using the CACREP online directory, (<http://www.cacrep.org/directory/directory.cfm>), the names and contact information of 166 counselor education department chairs within the North Central region of the United States was identified. This process generated four names.

### *Participant selection*

Initial contact was made with potential participants via phone or email to describe the focus of the study and invite participation. An explanation of the risks and benefits of participation, and the criteria for inclusion were explained to potential participants who responded to the initial contact. A research packet containing a recruitment letter introducing the study the informed consent document a contact form and the background information form was sent following the information sheet. After sending out the research packets, interviews were scheduled. Initial interviews took place at the participants' discretion, and were audiotaped and transcribed.

## Data Collection: Participant Interviews

*Initial interviews.* Participant interviews were used as the primary source of data collection in this study. The researcher conducted eight initial participant interviews in person, traveling long distances to locations designated by participants as private and accessible (e.g., participant's home, participant's office). Two interviews were conducted via the phone. Digital audio recordings were made of all 10 initial interviews. A semi-structured interview was used to guide the process. Questions from the interview include: (a) Reflect on the experiences that influenced your decision to become a teacher. Who, if anyone influenced your decision to teach; (b) What factors in your environment are most important to your development as a teacher; (c) Describe what it means to be recognized by your colleagues as an excellent teacher.

*Follow-up interviews.* Follow-up interviews were scheduled with participants after data analysis of the initial interviews was completed. Participants were presented with transcripts of their initial interviews for review and feedback prior to the follow-up. The primary function of the follow-up interview was to determine accuracy and collect any additional information that may have transpired since the initial interview. All follow-up interviews were conducted over the phone and digitally recorded for accuracy.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study proceeded through the steps presented by Moustakas (1994), combined with ideas proposed by Colaizzi (1973), Keen (1975), and Stevick (1971). These steps are described in a linear fashion in the sections below; however, each step involves a validation process that requires the researcher to oscillate between the emerging data and the more naïve data contained in the previous steps. At every step of this process, the researcher kept a journal to reflect upon the potential influence of her initial theories and ideas about the phenomenon, as well as her on-going reactions from engaging in the study. The following paragraph describes each of 12 steps used to conducted data analysis for this study.

*12 Steps of data analysis.* In step 1 of data analysis, a professional transcription service was used to transcribe all of the initial interviews from the audio recordings. Next, in step 2, the researcher read and re-read each interview transcript in order to "acquire a feeling for them" (Colaizzi, 1978, p. 59). It was at this step that the researcher wrote individual memos for each participant transcript. Step 3 of data analysis involved the researcher selecting meaningful text from the transcripts. Using the qualitative software HyperResearch, the researcher was able to select passages and assign them a code. Some passages were assigned

several codes revealing the complexity of their meaning. The codes were then stored in the electronic codebook for further data analysis. In step 4, after coding the selected text, appropriate categories were created to place the coded text in the electronic codebook, starting with three major categories that corresponded to the study's research questions: (1) Early Training Experiences, (2) Doctoral Training Experiences, and (3) Post-Doctoral Training Experiences. Subsequent categories emerged from the data analysis, representing groups of codes that were related. In steps 5 and 6, data from the follow-up interview was combined with the original interview data for the researcher to recycle through and reflect. Revisiting the data served to further develop ideas and organize existing codes into larger categories. Step 7 involved the organization of categories into thematic clusters. Steps 8 and 9 were devoted to the creation of both textural and structural descriptions of each theme. Passages were extrapolated from interview transcripts to demonstrate how each theme was represented in the text.

According to Moustakas (1994), this process functions as a way of sorting through the multiplicity of actual and possible explanations for how the themes are related. Imaginative variance enables the researcher to derive structural themes from the textural descriptions that have been obtained through phenomenological reduction. In step 10, the structural descriptions were integrated with the textural descriptions in order to arrive at a textural-structural synthesis of meanings and essences for the experiences investigated in this study. Step 11 introduced the critical eye of an external auditor to review the research method, non-identified participant interview transcripts, analysis notes, individual summaries, and final analysis products (e.g., general structural description of resilience and collective, analytic narrative). The auditor provided feedback on if the data collected and the results generated represented the actual study. Changes recommended as a result of this audit included removing two major themes, which were not pertinent to answering the research questions. In the final step 12, data analysis consisted of integrating the findings with and relevant literature from the literature review to develop an original contribution.

## Findings

Participants reflected on their personal qualities and why they are meaningful in the development of teachers in counselor education. In generating their responses, participants reflected on how they want to be perceived as teachers. They considered both how their students might describe them and actual feedback received from students. Participants gave

specific examples to illustrate their personal qualities. The following characteristics are listed in order of importance: (a) pride in teaching, (b) demonstrating care, (c) challenging students, (d) authenticity, (e) passion for teaching, (f) organized, and (g) creative.

### *Pride in Teaching*

The term pride can sometimes be interpreted to mean arrogance or conceit; however, in this study, participants considered pride an endearing quality. Through the participant reflections, one can gain a better understanding of what it means to have pride (Professor 3) Perhaps one of the best descriptions of pride in teaching came from Professor 6: “I think that there is the underlying foundation of a desire, a wanting to be good at [teaching]...a passion for trying to do the best we can and seeking out opportunities to get the experience to hone those skills.” He openly acknowledged that good teachers are often those who want to be.

Having pride in one’s vocation adds value and purpose to one’s life. It seems the old adage is true: if you love what you do, you’ll never work a day in your life. Professor 5 expressed a similar point stating, “The one thing I wanted to do, I’ve been able to do...I wanted to train school counselors [and] I’ve been in front of students 12 months a year for 23 years.” He admits that, “there’s been satisfaction [but] it’s been a bumpy road too.”

Pride in being a good teacher was described in many ways. Participants expressed their pride through love of teaching, confidence in their ability to teach, and a satisfaction at having chosen to teach as part of their career. Pride in being a teacher was the only quality shared by all 10 participants in this study. In the next section participants describe their personal style as teachers, specifically how they communicate care for students.

### *Demonstrating Care*

Most of the participants reflected on the importance of communicating care for students. Caring is a broad term that may refer to any number of words or deeds. In this study, participants demonstrated care for students by building relationships, respecting student opinions, and openly aligning with the students through shared experiences. Professor Likewise, Professor 4 made a good case for the benefits of communicating that you care for students. In the following passage, she acknowledged her personal responsibility in caring for students

“[Students] really couldn’t care less what you’ve done in the past, what your resume says, what your grades have been, whether you got a teaching award last year. What they care about is what you do for them in their class and beyond content. They know if you care. And they will work harder when you care about their education and care about them as individuals.”

There are many ways to demonstrate care for students. For instance, most participants acknowledged that establishing relationships and getting to know students one-on-one is a vital and rewarding part of caring for students. In fact, relationships are “the core of learning,” and faculty should —think of [their] classrooms as places to build relationships [and] earn respect,” stated Professor 10. For Professor 2, “it’s the relationships you build with students, and the time you give them that really matters to students”. According to Professor 7, it is important to build long lasting relationships, “[students] know that I care deeply about them, and that I will be in touch ten years from now. I’m in touch with almost all of our graduates in this department, and I hear from many of them very regularly.

### *Challenging Students*

Participants were intentional about challenging students as a means of promoting growth and change. They described themselves as having “high expectations,” being “really hard,” or using “difficult course material.” Professor 10 acknowledged that he pushes students to their limits, which “is part of the process that makes them grow into knowing who they are...” Students are accountable for learning assigned material, and are expected to answer questions in class. Professor 6 tells his students, “In my class, you may be put on the spot, so be ready for it...”

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, challenging instructors often develop a reputation among students. Professor 7 reflected on her reputation among students stating, “[Students] would describe me as passionate, very hard working, continual high expectations, and some might say hard.” Professor 4 also reflected on her reputation among students. In the following passage she describes a very candid conversation with a student related to her status as a challenging instructor.

“I had a student come in the other day...she said, ““you know what they say about you, don’t you...they say, you learn a lot in your classes. But you are really hard.”” Yes, I know that... That’s true. Guilty as charged.”

### *Authenticity*

The participants in this study, being an authentic teacher was important; akin to being genuine, sincere, or down to earth with students and colleagues. Being authentic also meant being honest and real with students, especially as it relates to their capacity to make mistakes. Professor 10, for example, stated, “there is confidence in knowing that failure is always in the back pocket... If you fail you are learning too so you might as well go ahead and try new things” particularly in higher education. Instructors are often seen as experts in their field, which makes it hard to admit when one does not have all the answers. In the following passage, Professor 1 offered this advice to faculty wrestling with how to respond authentically to difficult questions from students.

“...It’s far better just to say, ““Beats me. Gee, it’s a great question. Either you figure it out and we’ll talk next week or I’ll go try to find out,”” but just leave the pride at the door and be human and don’t know all the answers.”

Establishing trust with students is an important part of being authentic as a teacher. According to Professor 8, establishing trust with students is similar to establishing trust in the counseling process. “You can’t just say trust me. You can open and spill your guts to me. [Students] have to learn that they can trust you, and I think it’s the same thing with teaching.”

### *Passion for Teaching*

Participants often used the term *passionate* to answer the question, “How would your students describe you?” The following passages are reflections on that query: a) “[students would say] I think he is passionate about his profession, and that’s contagious and I feel differently about my profession because of him.” (Professor 3), b) “I think passionate is the first word [students] would use to describe me... A part of my passion is making sure that the future of our profession is strong, and that we have exceptional teachers.” (Professor 7).

“First of all, [students] have to see your enthusiasm... When you see other people excited about a topic, it’s hard not to get excited, too... You have to like the content area and you really have to have a passion for it. I think that comes out when I teach.” (Professor 4).

### *Organization*

Being organized, as a teacher, was reflected on by a few participants. Professor 1 learned through experience that being organized is important as a teacher. He stated that “I try very hard to be prepared...when you go into the classroom you better have a plan for

[students] or they're going to have a plan for you.” Professor 10 explained, “There’s a lot of effort behind the scenes that [students] don’t know about ... I have to be ready to support... I have to know what they are going to need before they need it.” It requires a lot of time and skill.

### *Creativity*

Creativity in teaching was also reflected on by a few of the participants in this study. Creative strategies such as short stories, special clothing, and humor were used to generate unique and profound ways of introducing concepts to students. Professor 9 described his creative approach to teaching students about self care in counseling: “To remind students about the importance of self-care, every week I’m going to wear a different hat...weird hats, hot hats, funny hats, ball caps.” His point was, “every week, they see the hat and at least at some point think I’ve got to take care of myself.”

## Discussion

Teacher training in counselor education has evolved over the years. Before ACES developed guidelines for doctoral study in 1977, decisions concerning training doctoral students to teach were left up to individual programs. This program oriented directive led to varying outcomes in doctoral student preparation to teach. In 1994, CACREP recognized teacher training in its doctoral level standards, and today teacher training is included as a doctoral level skill in the 2009 CACREP Standards. The present study sought to add to the discussion concerning the lack of training to teach at university level provided by counselor education programs. Additionally, through the common themes discovered in this study, participants also added to what is known in counselor education concerning the role of opportunities for real-world teaching experiences, mentors or influential instructors, and personal qualities in the development of excellent teachers.

### Application of the Findings to the Literature

The common themes discussed previously were supported by the research. The personal qualities of excellent teachers serves as an important outcome to consider in preparing doctoral students to teach. Participants reflected on many of same characteristics described in the literature (i.e. pride in teaching, care for students, authenticity, passion for teaching, challenging students, organized, and creative). Acker (2003) conducted research on

the reflections of professors who had been recognized for their outstanding teaching in order to identify characteristics commonly associated with excellent college and university teaching. According to the author, outstanding teachers exhibit a sense of passion for learning, for their discipline, and for teaching. Jenkins and Speck (2007) explored the characteristics of effective teaching among award winning university professors. Given the variety of participant personalities, teaching styles, and disciplines, the authors concluded that excellent professors promote and cultivate a caring attitude toward teaching and learning.

Counselor education doctoral programs are asked to consider the outcomes of this study in establishing support for curriculum changes to doctoral programs. Programs are also encouraged to act intentionally in creating opportunities for doctoral students to teach. Perhaps counselor education programs will consider developing a specialized experience for advanced doctoral students to further their knowledge of how to teach. The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) in collaboration with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has done extensive work with institutions to encourage a similar initiative. In fact, according to its website, —the Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) program is a national movement to transform the way aspiring faculty members are prepared for their careers|| (<http://www.preparing-faculty.org/>). The program advocates for college and universities to legitimize teacher training for doctoral students through credentialing programs in college teaching. The PFF program offers training for institutions, departments, or programs interested in developing these areas for their doctoral students.

#### Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of the phenomenological design used to conduct this study was that while the data fostered in-depth information about the development of excellent teachers in counselor education, the data did not result in a breadth of information. As such, one could argue that domains outside of counselor education may have differing findings, or that excellence in teaching may be able to be operationalized differently had the sample been broader or questions applied to other disciplines.

Another limitation is that the participants represented a fairly homogenous sample with regard to certain individual demographics (e.g., generational cohort, race, level of education, national locale). Participants from different racial backgrounds, age cohorts, or stages of career development could have provided additional information on the development of excellent teachers in counselor education.

Another limitation that should be addressed is the exclusion of unidentified excellent teachers from the participant pool. There are many excellent teachers in counselor education who have not received recognition, and were therefore, not included in this study. Finally, the primary researcher conducted all of the data collection and the majority of data analysis alone, which serves as a limitation. Important aspects of the data collection and interpretation could have been missed, though several intentional strategies (e.g. bracketing) were used to minimize the impact of this limitation.

Future studies should follow-up on the qualitative data found in the present study and compliment it with quantitative data. For example, having a mixed model design where researchers could explore what factors excellent educators were found to possess, while also examining personality traits and scores students earn in those courses would be ideal. Further, extending these concepts to examine what facets of excellence in counselor education were specific to the domain of counseling vs. applicable to higher-education instruction and applied graduate programs would complement the present study.

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