



# **Teacher Preparation and College and Career Readiness: A 3-Year, Longitudinal Study**

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College and career readiness<sup>1</sup> has been cited as a national educational priority (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). The importance of a postsecondary education in the United States has been emphatically underscored in empirical data (McCaughy & Venezia, 2015; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011) as well as in anecdotal evidence from business leaders and educators alike. For example, in Texas, previous efforts focused on providing *access* to college to students but have now shifted to *retention*—hoping to ensure that more students not only earn a college degree, but also gain the credentials, skills, and knowledge necessary to meet the ever-growing workforce demands in the state. The *60x30TX Plan* (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2015) has the overarching goal that 60% of all Texans between the ages of 25 and 34 will have a certificate or degree by 2030. The plan asserts:

For Texas to solve problems and address public concerns now and in the future, it must have a large workforce with the skills and knowledge to push the state forward. This workforce must be educated and able to adapt and compete at the highest levels to maintain a strong state economy. (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2015, p. v)

Indicative of this national trend toward “marketable skills,” and a growing focus on societal investment in higher education, the plan’s goals statement reads: “Far from resting solely on the shoulders of institutions of higher education in the state, this goal belongs to those who

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<sup>1</sup> College and career readiness and postsecondary readiness are used interchangeably in this white paper (Conley, 2010; McCaughy & Venezia, 2015).

desire to train and retain a globally competitive workforce. It also belongs to those who desire greater prosperity for Texans from all backgrounds” (p. 13). Other states have similar initiatives, and the trend toward preparing a highly skilled workforce is clear in educational conversations in multiple contexts. Today, college and career readiness is a relatively ubiquitous phrase in educational circles (e.g., Conley, 2010, 2005; McClafferty Jarsky, McDonough, & Nunez, 2009; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996).

At the same time, the under-preparedness of students for postsecondary education is considered a historical problem (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005), and while the importance of assisting students in becoming college ready at the secondary level is being emphasized, gaps among student groups remain, with minorities lagging behind their peers, particularly in 6-year graduation rates at 4-year institutions (Camera, 2015). It is estimated that 41% of the Latina/o population in the United States does not have a high school diploma (Fry, 2010), and those that do enter postsecondary education are dropping out at far greater rates than their White classmates (Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009). As school systems in the United States, and Texas more specifically, are only projected to become more diverse but increasingly (re)segregated (Orfield & Yun, 1999), there continue to be gaps in persistence and graduation for minority students—gaps that have been cited in educational research for years (Camera, 2015).

Clearly, pre-service teachers in our teacher education programs are about to begin careers in a decidedly difficult academic environment. In an age of testing and standardized curriculum, these new teachers are stepping into an increasingly diverse (and highly segregated) setting with significant achievement gaps, and in addition to content, they are supposed to teach future generations the skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education. In the midst of trying to

navigate curriculum and other elements of their profession, teachers are also attempting to prepare students for the world beyond their classroom doors.

Though institutions of higher education will always play a key role in ensuring their graduates possess these marketable skills, K–12 practitioners must also be prepared to support students as they make the transition into higher education. Teacher preparation programs are a vital piece to this picture, particularly because statistics indicate a “greening trend” in education over the last 20 years, with approximately 12 to 15% of the teaching profession in the United States in their first or second year. At the same time, these teachers are often disproportionately represented or clustered in high-poverty schools (Sawuck & Rebora, 2016). Thus, emphasizing postsecondary readiness in teacher preparation is valuable for both future teachers and the educational spheres they will enter. The term *college and career readiness* is both complicated and nebulous, but vitally important to the classrooms future teachers will lead and the projects they will encounter.

At the same time, many academic discussions on college and career readiness either focus on school-wide systems (Mehan, et. al., 1996; Standing, Judkins, Keller, & Westat, 2008), on abilities individual students need for success (McClafferty Janksy, et. al., 2009), or a combination of the two (Conley, 2010, 2005). It is rare to find a classroom study on college and career readiness at any level, and an emphasis on college and career readiness is often missing altogether from discussions of teacher education, even though it is consistently and more broadly referred to as an important goal in education. The classroom and curriculum piece is important to creating any sort of K–16 partnership, especially those that include a variety of stakeholders (McCaughy & Venezia, 2015).

This has led to a number of questions in my own teaching and research: How do I begin the conversation about college and career readiness with future teachers, both complicating and making the concept more concrete? Specifically, how can I help future English Language Arts teachers begin to grapple with an individual perspective on college and career ready classrooms and give them strategies to best meet the needs of their future students? And finally, how do pre-service and novice teachers incorporate or distance themselves from these ideas in the classroom? These questions became the foundation for this work.

### **Related Literature**

Conley (2010) argues that “College and career readiness for all students seems to be an idea whose time has come” (p. 1). He continues, “Although the idea that high schools should prepare students for college and careers is hardly novel, what is new is the notion that essentially *all* students should be capable of pursuing formal learning opportunities beyond high school” (p. 1). There are a variety of very successful college and career readiness initiatives in the United States, a few in which I have been involved as a classroom teacher (e.g., GEAR-UP, AVID) and as a faculty member (e.g., AVID, Pathways). Two popular initiatives in Texas are Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) (Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996) and Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) (Standing, Judkins, Keller, & Westat, 2008; Texas Center for Educational Research, 2012). AVID, in particular, is remarkably successful at helping first-generation students gain access to 4-year institutions and to persist once enrolled. Students self-select into the AVID program, and through a variety of services, such as an elective classes and tutoring, develop college and career readiness skills throughout their education. GEAR-UP follows a cohort model, using an entire 7th grade as a cohort until they graduate from high school. Students are exposed to college and

career readiness early on, and early data analysis indicates GEAR-UP's success at helping students enroll in postsecondary education at rates higher than their peers (Amaro-Jimenez & Hungerford-Kresser, 2013).

Scholars argue that both policy initiatives and research related to access and attainment are “overwhelmingly focused at the individual level” (Jarsky, McDonough, & Nunez, 2009, p. 368). In previous work, I have emphasized large college readiness initiatives such as GEAR-UP and AVID and the ways they often require students to self-select as “college bound” or to be a part of a specific cohort of students to receive services (Amaro-Jimenez & Hungerford-Kresser, 2013). Since most research on college and career readiness focuses on school-wide partnerships to help students enter postsecondary education, for this paper, I was particularly interested in college and career readiness in classroom contexts. In summary, I am focused on what can be done for all students, not as an add-on or extra service, but within the educational experiences in their secondary school classrooms via their teachers, and especially new teachers recently graduated from teacher education programs.

### **Defining College and Career Readiness**

Conley (2010) defines college and career readiness as the level of preparation a student needs to enter postsecondary education and succeed without remediation in credit-bearing courses that lead to a baccalaureate program or a high-quality certificate program that offers opportunities in career pathways with potential for future advancement. In addition, Conley outlines four interrelated dimensions that affect college readiness at the secondary level: 1) key cognitive strategies, 2) key content knowledge, 3) academic behaviors, and 4) contextual skills and awareness. McCaughy & Venezia (2015) argue for an educational climate that allows students to “learn well and succeed in whatever setting they choose beyond high school,” and

that a high school diploma should open doors for students, not close access to particular pathways (McCaughy & Venezia, 2015, pp. 6–7). Every postsecondary pathway has different requirements, but research has shown common elements across pathways: 1) study skills, 2) time management skills, 3) persistence, 4) ownership of learning, 5) problem solving, 6) collecting and analyzing information, and 7) communicating in a variety of ways (Conley & McCaughy, 2012). These elements have been employed to align standards for postsecondary preparedness in the United States.

Unlike other states, Texas is not a “Common Core” state. Rather than aligning our curriculum with other states through the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), Texas created its own set of standards, the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) (EPIC, 2009). These were introduced through a multi-site consortium, and are intended to help align the P–16 curriculum statewide. Echoing McCaughy & Venezia’s (2015) commentary on the CCSS and the CCRS, I do not critique nor champion the College and Career Readiness standards in the courses I teach; I simply use them to catalyze discussions about postsecondary readiness and attainment with my students—future educators in the state of Texas. Along with colleagues, I aligned the English Language Arts sequence for our students intentionally with the standards, tracking their connections to national standards (NCTE/IRA) and to state classroom standards (TEKS). In my course, however, I also want students to think critically about standards and look beyond them. I want them to wrestle with frameworks and with their own experiences as students in the educational system (Britzman, 2003).

### **Academic Literacies and English Teacher Education**

Though I lean heavily on the definitions of college and career readiness outlined above, I believe that definitions of postsecondary readiness can be strengthened through a more culturally

responsive and nuanced discussion about academic literacies (Hungerford-Kresser & Amaro-Jimenez, 2012). While Conley's (2010) definition is deepened by his four dimensions and necessary for navigating a postsecondary education, it is important to note that minority and first-generation students often have culturally specific struggles at postsecondary institutions, particularly in predominately White universities, which are also vital elements of academic literacies (Hungerford-Kresser & Amaro-Jimenez, 2012; Oseguera, Locks, & Vega, 2009; Solorzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005). While "skills" are often the focus when discussing college and career readiness, in my work I prefer the conversation to include academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998). For a student to be deemed "successful" or college ready, he/she must be able to learn the particulars of the university, including the multiple discourses that exist at the institution and that change from class to class or group to group (Bartholomae, 2003; Bizzell, 2003; Elbow, 1998; Rose, 1998). My participants have experienced the discourses of the institution and managed to navigate them successfully (i.e., they are graduates with teaching credentials). I want them to focus on, and begin to re-contextualize these experiences, while learning about college readiness and academic literacies.

It is estimated that prior to entering teacher education, students have observed approximately 13,000 hours of teaching (Lortie, 1975). Often referred to as the "apprenticeship of the observer" (Lortie, 1975), the part of their lives that pre-service teachers have spent as students can cause tension in teacher education. Students in our programs have already established their sense of the teaching world before they have ever taught a lesson, and this over-familiarity "animates the fantasy that no one can teach anyone to become a teacher; each must learn his or her own way" (Britzman, 2003, p. 1). In short, teachers bring their own school autobiographies to their experiences in teacher education, and it becomes impossible to dissect

their new understandings of education from their experiential knowledge as students. Britzman (2003) writes that teaching is:

[a] struggle for voice and discursive practices amid a cacophony of past and present voices, lived experiences, and available practices. The tensions among what has preceded, what is confronted, and what one desires, shapes the contradictory realities of learning to teach. (p. 31)

Therefore, I am not asking students to leave their educational autobiographies at the door, but through curriculum, inquiry, and metacognitive work, I am asking them to challenge their previous notions about education more broadly, and in particular, their ideas about college and career readiness and the education of all students in their future classrooms.

## **Methods**

### **Study Design and Rationale**

This was a 3-year longitudinal qualitative study, meant to look at data over time. Multiple classes taught across semesters were compared, as well as data for individual case study participants across time and locations (i.e., during their courses, student teaching, and classrooms after graduation). The action research component of this study allowed me to study my own practice and classes, adjusting my teaching based on the immediate analysis of data. I was able to impact students in real time, improving my courses and my program at my institution (Hubbard & Power, 1999; Somekh, 2009, 2006). The case study methodology allowed for a deeper dive into the data over time, focusing on individual students and their growth as they left the teacher preparation pathway and entered their own classrooms (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). The study of the transition from student to teacher is imperative to help teacher educators improve preparation pathways.

**Year 1.** In the first year of data collection, I collected questionnaire responses from participants in my secondary English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) 7–12 methods class, both at the beginning and end of the semester. Questions were repeated, and participants were asked to point to differences in their responses and the elements of the course curriculum responsible for these shifts. I also followed two participants into their student teaching semester and observed and interviewed them six times, along with a more-detailed biographical interview for each, a total of 14 observations and interviews.

**Year 2.** In the second year of data collection, I repeated the process from year one in my methods class, and followed four additional participants into student teaching for a total of 18 observations and interviews. I also followed the two case studies (Stephanie and Alejandra) from Year 1 into their first year of teaching and observed and interviewed them nine times: four times for Alejandra and five times for Stephanie.

**Year 3.** In the third year of data collection, I repeated the data collection process listed above for the methods class, and managed to interview three of the student teaching participants (now novice teachers) from year two at least once, for a total of five observations and interviews. One moved out of the area to teach, and another took a semester off, and did not start teaching until January. I have included her school in the data table, but she was not a part of the interview data I collected. I also followed the two case studies from year 1 into their second year of teaching and interviewed them three times each, for a total of six observations and interviews.

### **Participants and Setting**

**Urban State University (USU).** Urban State University (a pseudonym) is in a large, metropolitan area in the Southwestern United States. In 2014–15 (the year the study began), student enrollment was 34,868. By the 2016–17 academic year, enrollment was 58,664; it is a

large institution and growing rapidly. The 6-year graduation rate hovers at approximately 45%. Ranked fifth nationally in undergraduate diversity, 24.2% of the student body is Hispanic, which gives the institution a designation as an HSI, and it is also designated as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI). At the same time, in 2014–15, an estimated 43% of students were eligible for Pell grants and 29% were first-generation college students.

**Methods class.** Of the 33 students enrolled (three fall semesters: 2014, 2015, 2016), there were 27 females and six males. Of the 27 females, nine identified as Latina/o or Hispanic, and two as African-American. Six of the male students were White, and one was Asian American. Thirty-three students participated in the questionnaire at the beginning of the course, and 31 at the end. Some answered all of the questions, but a few left an occasional question blank. From the questionnaire data, 15 students transferred to USU from junior college, and 16 started their postsecondary educations at USU, with only two having first been at another 4-year institution in the state. The majority graduated from public, suburban high schools, though a few students categorized their schools as urban, and one was home-schooled. When asked if they considered themselves “college-ready” upon arriving at USU, 16 responded yes, nine said no, and eight gave a combination response (yes/no; i.e., “in some areas, yes, in some areas, no”). A handful of students indicated they were college ready upon arriving at USU because of their time in a junior college preceding their enrollment. Thirty-two of the enrolled students were juniors or seniors studying English Education. Students need a cumulative 3.0 GPA to be admitted to the College of Education. One student in fall 2014 was a graduate student studying second language teaching and who opted to take the course as an elective.

**Case study participant 1.** Alejandra’s (all names are pseudonyms) parents are from El Salvador. Both are college graduates. Her father has a finance degree, and her mother a

marketing degree, although she became a teacher. When Alejandra was two, her family moved to El Salvador and she attended an American school. They returned to the United States by the time she was seven because of political unrest. She graduated from a 3A high school that she claimed was about “60% Hispanic and African American.” She characterized herself as “Miss 4.0 and valedictorian and stuff” and earned a number of college acceptances. Alejandra chose USU because of scholarship money, even though it was close to home. She argued that the full ride was a “good opportunity [she] couldn’t turn down.” She began in the pre-med program, then decided English teaching was the appropriate degree path because of her passion for literacy, but managed to graduate in 4 years by taking heavy semester loads and full summer sessions.

**Case study participant 2.** Stephanie’s family is very proud of her teaching career. Stephanie is a first-generation, Mexican-American college graduate. Her mother has a ninth-grade education, and her father graduated from high school and attended junior college for 2 years. Her father’s work with oil companies meant her family lived in a variety of cities with oil-centric economies. Eventually, they settled permanently in the town where Stephanie graduated from high school, where her father started a home remodeling business. This town is on the outskirts of a big city near USU, and is now a thriving suburb. While her high school was 4A, Stephanie told me, “[My town] started to get big, but it was just country living, pretty much.” Her parents encouraged her to apply to college because she was “the most willing to go.” Stephanie had a 3.4 high school GPA and went to junior college before transferring to USU. She opted to finish her degree at USU because her best friend was there. Stephanie started out as a psychology major before gravitating to English Education.

These two case studies were chosen because they identified as Latina. The similarities in background end there, however, and that contrast is what made them ideal cases for this study.

Latina students come from an array of backgrounds with a variety of life and academic experiences. For example, some transfer into a university, and some begin as freshmen at 4-year institutions. At large, urban, state universities in particular, these diverse students find their way into English Education, and soon will enter our local public school system as novice teachers. I continued following Alejandra and Stephanie into their first and second years of teaching. The enrollment demographics of their campuses can be found in Table 3.

**Additional student teachers.** In addition to Alejandra and Stephanie in spring 2015, I followed five student teachers (Corey, Brenda, Carolina, Courtney, and Callie) from the previous semester into their student teaching placements in spring 2016. I saw four of the participants six times each (three in their junior high/middle school placement, and three in their high school placement), and one participant just three times, in her junior high placement. Four of the participants were female, with one identifying as Latina, and the other participant was a White male.

Each student teacher participant had two student teaching placements, one at a local junior high/middle school and one at a high school. They spent half of their student teaching experience in each. The demographics of the student teaching placements for Alejandra and Stephanie in spring 2015 can be found in Table 1. Table 2 contains the enrollment demographics for the student teaching placements during spring 2016.

I was able to interview three of the original student teaching participants from year 2 during year 3, just one time each. Corey was hired at the high school where he did his student teaching, Brenda was hired in the same district, but on a different campus, and Callie was hired at a different high school but within the same district. I did not interview Carolina, because she waited a semester to start teaching, but she also ended up at the high school where had completed

student teaching. Courtney moved out of the area, and I was unable to interview her because of logistics. Table 4 contains the enrollment demographics for the participants who remained in the local area to teach after graduation.

Table 1  
*Enrollment Demographics at Student Teaching Placements (Spring 2015)*

Student Teaching	Student Total	Economically Disadvantaged	African American	Hispanic	White	Other
Alejandra						
High School	2843	51.9%	16.3%	39.8%	37%	6.9%
Junior High	722	64.1%	18.4%	46.8%	28.8%	6%
Stephanie						
High School	2,333	17.3%	18.3%	19%	52.6%	10.1%
Middle School	872	27.4%	18.8%	20.5%	46.4%	14.3%

Table 2  
*Enrollment Demographics at Student Teaching Placements (Spring 2016)*

Student Teaching	Student Total	Economically Disadvantaged	African American	Hispanic	White	Other
Corey						
High School	2085	27.1%	32%	25.5%	30.2%	12.3%
Middle School	855	55%	34.6%	24.7%	28.8%	11.9%
Brenda						
High School	1656	45.5%	46.5%	25.2%	15%	13.3%
Middle School	929	36.3%	17.4%	32.7%	41.2%	8.7%
Carolina						
High School	2918	55.8%	33%	36%	24.6%	6.4%
Junior High	792	37.4%	17.3%	18.2%	54.9%	9.6%
Courtney						
High School	3361	25.5%	14.3%	17.8%	57.4%	10.5%
Junior High	1091	94.2%	13.1%	77.6%	5.3%	4%
Callie						
Junior High	797	55.1%	14.1%	33.9%	48.1%	3.9%

Table 3  
*Enrollment Demographics in First Teaching Job After Graduation (two case studies)*

1st Year Teaching	Student Total	Economically Disadvantaged	African American	Hispanic	White	Other
Alejandra						

High School	743	69%	12.1%	57.3%	26.9%	9.7%
Stephanie Middle School	872	27.4%	18.8%	20.5%	46.4%	14.3%

Table 4  
*Enrollment Demographics in First Teaching Job After Graduation*

1st Year Teaching	Student Total	Economically Disadvantaged	African American	Hispanic	White	Other
Corey High School	2085	27.1%	32%	25.5%	30.2%	12.3%
Brenda Middle School	878	40.5%	14%	29%	50.3%	6.7%
Carolina * Not interviewed						
High School	2918	55.8%	33%	36%	24.6%	6.4%
Callie High School	3725	87.2%	19.7%	69.2%	5.3%	5.8%

### Data Sources

Over the course of the academic year, I collected a variety of data from varied sources. Participants in the methods class (the fall semester in 2014, 2015, and 2016) were given open-ended questionnaires via Survey Monkey at both the beginning and end of the semester about college and career readiness and the English Language Arts. All responses were anonymous, and I received 50 responses—half at the start and half at the completion of the semester. Some questions repeated and I asked them to try to articulate what changed their responses over the course of the semester. Currently, I have a paper under review that delves into the questionnaire responses specifically (Hungerford-Kresser & Amaro-Jimenez, under review). I also collected all their classroom work (i.e., reader responses, Blackboard discussions, lesson plans, unit plans, Thinking Journals, Writer’s Notebooks).

In student teaching (spring semester), I collected all their assignments (i.e., weekly reflections, lesson plans, unit plans, teacher work sample). At the same time, I regularly observed

their teaching, followed by a meeting with a recorded interview. As well as reviewing their teaching in interviews, I tried to engage them in continued discussions about college and career readiness. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in their entirety for analysis. I kept a research journal throughout the project in which I wrote analytic memos about emerging themes, ongoing questions, and ideas for reconfiguring the class or assignments the following academic year (Lincoln & Guba, 1984; Merriam & Associates, 2002). When I visited classrooms after the participants graduated, I took observation notes, and then debriefed and recorded interviews after each observation. Often, I stayed for multiple class periods to get a better idea of their teaching needs and the patterns in classroom composition. We discussed their teaching, goals, and college and career readiness. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. At the same time, I kept field notes and a research journal, making use of reflective memos as a means of impacting my teaching and curriculum alignment in the program, as well as furthering my research.

### **Data Analysis**

Using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I analyzed the data in three waves. First, I coded the data from the methods class. I observed the questionnaires and highlighted common themes between the beginning of the semester questionnaire and the end of the semester questionnaire. I also highlighted outliers and looked for any apparent changes or disconnection from the course curriculum. Second, I coded all the interview transcripts from the student teaching semesters the same way. Third, I repeated the process with the data from the novice classroom years. I compared all of the coding and combined codes into related themes where possible. As a means of triangulation, I analyzed various artifacts—student assignments, reflections, lesson plans and other key assignments,

along with my own research journal—and looked for similar themes and codes or connections to any outliers. The highlighted preliminary themes are thus based on codes I saw across cases and contexts.

### **Findings**

With such a large body of qualitative data, all findings from all analyses are hard to present in any one paper. What follows are findings from the analyses above, but focused on the 3 years of questionnaire data plus data collected with Alejandra and Stephanie throughout student teaching and their first 2 years in the classroom. I have provided selected pieces of data to function as exemplars, demonstrating the kinds of data points that led to the findings.

Data from the teacher preparation program piece of the study are encouraging and indicate teacher preparation pathways can help future teachers question their own beliefs and begin to recognize the role they can play in the postsecondary futures of their students. However, this shift and commitment to helping all students have postsecondary opportunities is not without its tensions. The tensions novice teachers face when attempting to “do right” by their students are important to understanding the challenges they will face in the classroom. The strong pedagogical practices encouraged in our program, meant to foster college and career readiness for all students in their classrooms, were at the root of the tensions they experienced in their future classrooms.

### **College and Career Readiness as a Partnership**

Throughout the study, I saw a shift in pre-service teachers’ perspectives, as they began to view college and career readiness as a partnership between student and classroom teacher, and the emphasis continued as they entered their own classrooms (Questionnaire responses in fall 2014, 2015, 2016; Field Notes spring 2016, 2017). For example, in the beginning of the methods

semester, participants typically put the onus for being “college and career ready” firmly on the shoulders of the individual student. An example follows:

As far as prior intellectuality, I think colleges are able to accept any type of student.

There are a plentiful amount of resources that are available to help. . . . But for everything else I introduce you to WEBS (I made up the acronym just now). W: Students are Willing to go to class, even if it means waking up early, missing parties, and spending less time with friends. E: Students are Excited for the material they will be learning, and even if they don’t particularly like a certain course or lesson, they’re excited for what the learning will provide them in the future. The student is not only excited for graduation, but the work that leads to their diploma. B: Students understand that they are essentially coming in as Blank slates. They won’t know everything coming in. S: Students are self-reliant. They are responsible for their work, sleep and study habits. (Questionnaire response)

This data excerpt highlights what I uncovered throughout analysis. Initially, participants seemed to talk about college and career readiness in student-centric terms. Students have to be “[w]illing to go to class” and make sacrifices (i.e., “spending less time with friends”). It is up to the student to be enthusiastic about school, to learn (“They won’t know everything coming in”), and they have to maintain a certain level of responsibility. This in particular was echoed regularly in the early data—the idea that no one else can do it for a student. Being able to motivate oneself was considered by many to be a vital element of postsecondary readiness.

However, participants’ definitions shifted over the course of the academic year and into student teaching, and this shift was solidified by the time they entered their own classrooms. The secondary classroom and the teacher’s role in fostering college and career readiness, or helping

students on the path to postsecondary readiness, became a theme in data analysis. Excerpts from end-of-course questionnaires demonstrate this. For example, one student wrote: “I think I understand what [college and career readiness] means connected to the classroom now. High school classes (English in particular) have to be able to prepare students to survive in college classes.” Another student emphasized a shift from the student’s point of view to including the teacher’s role:

At the beginning of the semester I considered “college readiness” from the student’s point of view. I still do but now have added the teacher’s perspective too. Now college readiness means being organized, attentive, on time, prepared, enthusiastic, open minded, patient, creative, etc. All of those skills require great practice and will from teachers and students to create the best learning environment possible.

In this excerpt, a participant explains the importance of teaching students learning strategies in addition to content, because this gives students “agency” to impact their own learning:

A student needs to know which study and learning strategies work for him/her. An English teacher should expose students to multiple learning strategies and encourage students to reflect on which strategies work for them. . . . A student needs agency, the ability to take charge of [his/her] learning.

During student teaching, Alejandra discussed the importance of creating a college-ready classroom environment where students are able to meet with success and rise to challenges. She argued that prior to her methods course, she had never thought about college and career readiness at all, and therefore, had not considered the teacher’s role in fostering it (Alejandra, post-observation interview). Stephanie had a similar experience, and benefited from reflecting on her

own postsecondary experiences when planning for lessons in student teaching, and later, her curriculum in her own classroom (Stephanie, post-observation interview).

Participants began to focus on English teachers' abilities to help with strategy instruction that would be useful in college, but by also giving future students the time to reflect on their learning and progress: "English teachers can help by showing good strategies and constantly reflecting on them" (anonymous student reflection). I found this to be an important trend, one I want to continue tracking in future analyses. In the beginning, participants' definitions of college and career readiness were very individualized. However, as the academic year progressed, they started seeing themselves as future ELAR teachers within the definition. That is, they began to recognize their part in enabling college readiness—an important shift. It takes the definition of college and career readiness and moves it from a difficult-to-understand concept to one that can be developed. Thus, skills for postsecondary readiness are viewed more like developable academic literacies (Zamel & Spack, 1998), bringing teachers into an initially student-centered discussion. This development is not strictly on the shoulders of students, but on those of educators too, who should encourage pre-service teachers to be proactive in creating college-ready classrooms, and provide opportunities for all the students who cross their paths. This is an important step in making the individual classroom part of college and career ready initiatives and pathways (McClafferty Janskey, McDonough, & Nunez, 2010; McCaughey & Venezia, 2015).

### **The English Language Arts as a Vehicle for College Readiness**

It is important to note that when citing their reasons for becoming English teachers, all students pointed to a love for literacy in some form and a desire to foster this love in future generations. An example from a beginning-of-course questionnaire read: "I LOVE literature, and I want to help others see why I think English is so awesome." It is no surprise, then, that in the

beginning, when asked about the English Language Arts connection to postsecondary readiness, most students narrowly focused this connection on reading and writing. One questionnaire read, “Good reading and writing skills are necessary for college . . .” For some, this focus did not change by the end of their teacher preparation: “Students must know how to write a good paper for their classes,” and others focused on general literacy connections even when talking about college more widely: “In order to succeed in college, literacy is a must.” The majority of participants, however, cited a change in their definition, and, once in the classroom, overwhelmingly saw their classes as a place to foster college readiness—both the skills indicated by the standards and those “softer” skills they had learned to appreciate via their own experiences in the classroom. Later, this was particularly true in Alejandra and Stephanie’s classrooms (Hungerford-Kresser & Vetter, 2017).

Data suggest that in the methods course and in student teaching, the curricular focus on particular strategies and skills helped students re-evaluate their original claims about connections to ELAR. One student wrote:

I think the English Language Arts are the most important part of college readiness because it can teach the students many skills they can use in other classes. Some of these skills are literacy, cognitive and rhetorical thinking, organization, time-management, metacognition, note taking, speaking, etc. My answer has changed in that I have practiced those skills in your class and can affirm they can be learned through the English Language Arts because of that. (End of course questionnaire)

This particular idea is important because ELAR is mentioned in connection to many aspects of a common definition of college and career readiness or skills outlined in the College and Career Readiness Standards (e.g., literacy, rhetorical thinking, organization, time management,

metacognition, note taking), and because of the connection to content in the course (EPIC, 2009). A goal for me as an instructor is not only to encourage a curriculum that fosters postsecondary success for all students, but to offer pre-service teachers tools to help them achieve this goal (Conley, 2005). In summary, the course aims to connect a theoretical discussion to the practical so that participants have a variety of tools for reaching a majority of students.

Additionally, this appears to carry over beyond coursework and into classrooms. For example, Alejandra and Stephanie emphasized this connection in their focus on collaboration as non-negotiable in their classrooms. (For a detailed discussion of this finding, see Hungerford-Kresser & Vetter, 2017). Based on personal experience in their own college careers, and their teacher preparation sequence, both women clearly understood the role collaboration plays in preparing students for postsecondary pathways. Thus, their classrooms were places where they constantly looked for ways to teach students softer skills like teamwork and argumentation via collaborative activities. This idea began in methods coursework, continued through student teaching, and then became a cornerstone of effective teaching in their own classrooms.

### **Resulting Tensions**

The data discussed above demonstrate the ways in which pre-service English teachers are able to make connections to the importance of college- and career-ready classrooms for their students, their place in these partnerships, and the inherent connections between the ELAR curriculum and college and career readiness. However, when these pre-service teachers are followed into their classrooms, the experiences described in the case studies indicate that even the strongest of novice teachers can struggle in the classroom when their convictions to create college-ready classrooms are challenged by other requirements. While college and career readiness is lauded as important for all, and especially in Texas, the current minimum-skills-

based testing culture can hinder teachers from being able to consistently create the college-ready classrooms they envision. The minimum skills testing movement in Texas created tensions for the case study participants in this study (Hungerford-Kresser & Vetter, 2017). While they were strong teachers and able to rely heavily on their preparation, current mentoring relationships, and their personal experiences as Latinas in public schools, they still struggled with the incongruity of the college- and career-ready, and minimum-skills-based, state narratives and mandates. This tension, along with the findings in the teacher preparation piece of the study, should inform future endeavors in the state.

## **Implications**

### **Teacher Preparation**

In teacher preparation, it is important that we allow future teachers time to digest and clarify what it means to create college-ready classrooms. Understanding the concept as more than just a set of standards allows novice teachers to begin to grasp what college and career readiness for all students means. This study indicates a benefit in allowing them to use an autobiographical lens to center their understandings of postsecondary readiness. In fact, with the case studies in this work, those autobiographical understandings helped them navigate conflicts between college and career readiness and minimum skills mandates in their classrooms (Hungerford-Kresser & Vetter, 2017). This was an added unexpected benefit to the curricular design.

### **Policy Discussions**

While there are decades of research on the negative impact of standardized testing on students, and in Texas schools particularly (i.e., Kohn, 1999; McNeil, 2000; Reigeluth, 1997; Valenzuela, 2005), there has been little discussion of the conflict that the minimum-skills-based-

testing movement and the college- and career-ready movement are bound to have. Both have found particular favor in Texas, but the ongoing clash in classrooms is very real for teachers. It is important for policy makers to focus on the long-term effects of testing culture and minimum-skills-based assessments on novice teachers in the classroom, as well as the students they serve. Giving all students in Texas the opportunity to pursue whatever postsecondary pathway they choose is a tremendous goal, but the current testing and accountability culture can stunt the goal's potential before it even has time to take root.

### **Future Research**

The field would benefit from studies on college and career readiness in teacher preparation programs and in novice classrooms in content areas other than ELAR. It would be interesting to note the way these findings manifest differently in math or science preparation, for example. Additionally, larger studies surveying and observing many more future and novice teachers from across the state would lend complexity to the discussion about college and career readiness in Texas. Having data across subject matters and from novice teachers who graduate from a variety of programs in a variety of institutions could ultimately do a great service for teacher preparation programs and novice teacher support services around the state.

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