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The Road from Paraprofessional to Certified Teacher: A State, School District, and University  
Partnership

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A dissertation  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

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by  
Robert A. Winstead  
December 2013

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Dr. Catherine Glascock, Chair  
Dr. Cecil Blankenship  
Dr. Virginia Foley  
Dr. James Lampley

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Keywords: special education, paraprofessional, alternative licensure

## ABSTRACT

The Road from Paraprofessional to Certified Teacher: A State, School District, and University

Partnership

by

Robert A. Winstead

Over the past few decades thousands of special education teachers have been teaching students with disabilities on emergency or temporary certificates (Barnes, Crow, & Schaefer, 2007). The majority of these teachers entered the field of education with little to no preparation. Most of these under qualified teachers were hired in rural areas. Prior to the establishment of the cohort between the Tennessee Department of Education and East Tennessee State University-Sevier County Schools in 2000, there had been little to no planning in addressing the challenge of teacher shortage, specifically teacher attrition, in East Tennessee for special education teachers (East Tennessee State University, 2009; State of Tennessee, Office of Research and Education Accountability, 2006).

The challenge of teacher shortage is secondary to teacher attrition for many school systems. Reasons teachers leave the profession are family or personal reasons, school staffing issues including layoffs, school closings, reorganizations, and retirement (Shakrani, 2008). The cost of high teacher attrition is felt in many ways. Examples include loss of outlays from states and local school districts, the challenge school districts face searching for replacements; and most of all, the cost to the student (Carroll, 2007).

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of 12 paraprofessionals who completed the first East Tennessee State University-Sevier County Special Education Cohort to earn special education teaching certification. The 2000 ETSU-Sevier County Cohort started with 16

members. Currently 13 are teaching in special education, one cohort member is deceased, and two cohort members moved so that the other members do not know of their status. Cohort members received a 100% grant subsidy to participate in the program of study. The goal of the grant was “to improve the quality of instruction to students with disabilities from birth to 21 by increasing the number of appropriately endorsed special education teachers in Tennessee” (ETSU Special Education Institute, 2010, p. 2).

The most dominant findings were the experience and background of paraprofessionals as they made their way to becoming certified teachers. These experiences were helpful in a variety of ways. Examples include completing course work, developing instructional strategies, behavior management, coteaching, and providing training for their paraprofessionals. Another finding and a major theme was group bonding among the cohorts. This bonding provided a support group in meeting the course work demands.

Having access to local administrators who were their instructors and mentors was a consistent theme. Members of the cohort were supported by a 100% grant that provided the financial support necessary to make their journey possible; the necessity of that support was a common theme. The increased stress level, additional paper work, and responsibilities of being a certified teacher were other emerging themes. Time management was a prevalent theme throughout their experience. Finally, the support and admiration from their colleges, professors, and family members were major themes in their completing the cohort and becoming certified teachers.

## DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this research to my wife Jane B. Winstead. Without her love, encouragement, and honesty I would not be at this juncture in my life. Next, I dedicate this study to my immediate family: Morgan, Matthew, McKenzie, Colby, Emma, Carson Zane, and Jason. These people are the light of my life and I am so proud of them. I want to further dedicate this study to my parents Kenny and Thelma Winstead. Even though they did not always understand or agree with my life choices, they were always there for me. I also dedicate this to my sister Linda who has always supported me. Finally, a special dedication to the best person I ever knew, my brother David.

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I also wish to acknowledge those special people who without their assistance, encouragement, advice, and love I would not have completed this adventure. First my editor and friend whom without I would not/could not have completed this study, Dr. Elizabeth Fussell, I can never thank you enough. Next I want to thank my doctoral committee members specifically my chairperson, Dr. Catherine Glascock. Dr. Glascock was the perfect candidate in keeping me focused and committed.

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I want to thank Dr. Jack Parton, Director of Schools for Sevier County, who was a driving force in getting the first ETSU-Sevier County Cohort Grant approved. I wish to thank Dr.

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Finally, I want to thank a special friend, Dr. Joseph Fisher, former Assistant Commissioner for Special Education in Tennessee, who along with staff from East Tennessee State University and Sevier County Schools developed the first ETSU-Sevier County Cohort Program Grant, which began in 2000. Because of their commitment, vision, and love of children 39 people who began their career as paraprofessionals earned certification to teach students with disabilities in East Tennessee.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Shortages of teachers in special education have been a concern for local school systems, state departments of education, and parents for years. Compounding the problem of teacher attrition was the economic costs both from a human and financial perception specifically in rural areas that tended to have predominately low performing schools (Barnes, Crow, & Schaefer, 2007).

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) conducted a national survey in 2006-2007 that focused on increased retention of quality teachers. The survey results approximated teacher attrition and teacher turnover cost the nation approximately \$7 billion each year. This cost included the recruitment and staff development for those newly hired teachers (Carroll, 2007).

A second survey conducted by the Alliance for Excellent Education estimated the cost for replacing teachers who have left the profession was approximately \$2.2 billion annually (Shakrani, 2008). Adding the cost of replacing transfer teachers, public schools were paying well over \$6 billion each year, all of which was related to teacher attrition, teacher turnover, and transfers. This staggering statistic placed school systems, specifically rural and low economic, in a never-ending state of rebuilding and recruiting staff, making it virtually impossible to meet state and federal standards of closing student achievement gaps (Shakrani, 2008). Long-term trends in the national demand, supply, and shortage of teachers showed barriers to this shortage that have been attributed to culture, location, and lack of resources (Merisotis & McCarthy, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

The present study showed how Sevier County Schools, a rural school system in East Tennessee; East Tennessee State University (ETSU); and the Tennessee Department of Education, Division of Special Education, combined resources to address the shortage of special education teachers in the Eastern Region of Tennessee (East Tennessee State University [ETSU], 2009). This research focused on six of the original cohort participants who, while continuing to work as paraprofessionals, went to college, attended classes, and became certified special education teachers. The study explored the availability of local structures already in place to assist the grant in meeting the required scope and sequence strategies (ETSU, 2009). The information gleaned assisted rural and urban school districts, state departments of education, and institutes of higher education in their struggle to appropriately staff schools with certified special education teachers.

In 1975 the United States finally recognized a segment of the population whose needs and rights had been largely ignored (Goodrich, 1975). Finally and long overdue, a federal mandate to protect the rights of children with handicapping conditions was passed. This federal legislation was the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)*, *Public Law 94-142 (PL 94-142)*. *PL 94-142* not only gave children with handicapping conditions a right to enroll in public schools but also gave them the right to a *Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)* designed to meet the unique needs of the child arising from the child's disability. This initial legislation and the way children with handicapping conditions were treated, educated, and identified evolved over the years (Itkonen, 2007).

The education of children with disabilities was not entirely new in 1975; however, it was the piece of legislation that guaranteed the right of children with disabilities to attend public schools in America (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2011). A court decision entitled

*Brown v. Board of Education*, decided in 1954, provided students of color access to public education (Cozzens, 1998).

This decision was a clear mandate that all students regardless of race were to be educated together. The challenge for students with disabilities became the issue of what the law required as compared to what is in the best interest of the student. This became more evident when teachers and administrators were making decisions about placing students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. The evolution of *Public Law 94-142*, which was scheduled to be reauthorized by Congress every 4 years, saw an eventual change in the name of the legislation in 1990 to *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*; U.S. DOE, 2007b).

This change in title was not just a name change but recognized the increasing respect for the dignity and individuality of children with disabilities. The change in title also, if subtle, put the child before the disability. The phrase, a child with a disability, put the child first as opposed to previous labels as handicapped child, disabled child, or special education child (Logsdon, 2012).

The inclusion of children with disabilities in public school naturally gave rise to the need for teachers with specialized skills and knowledge provided *FAPE*. Inclusion implied students with disabilities had access to the entire school community and were not segregated or isolated into pull-out programs or separate schools (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP] n.d.). *PL94-142* guaranteed access to schools and had many additional purposes to students with disabilities. This paper was focused on one of those purposes: To “assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities” (U.S. DOE, 2010, p. 1).

To assure the effectiveness of education, there must be an adequate supply of teachers with specialized training. The 1982 case of *Board of Education v. Rowley* affirmed that schools



must ensure children with disabilities receive “personalized instruction with sufficient support services to permit them to benefit educationally from the instruction” (Beyer, 1989, p. 52).

The education of children with disabilities did not begin in 1975 when Congress enacted *Public Law 94-142*. Federal legislation really began to focus on their educational needs as early as the 1950s and 1960s. One of those legislative acts was the *Training of Professional Personnel Act of 1959* (U.S. OSEP, n.d.). This study was used to examine innovative ways states and school districts have ensured children with disabilities had access to a certified, licensed teacher with the specialized skills and knowledge to address their unique needs. The research was focused specifically on one such innovative method undertaken by the Tennessee Department of Education and the Sevier County School System; *The Paraprofessionals to Certified Teachers Project*.

*The Paraprofessionals to Certified Teachers Project* was an initiative in which the Sevier County School System; ETSU; and the Tennessee Department of Education, Division of Special Education, combined resources to address the shortage of special education teachers, (ETSU, 2009). Sevier County Schools, as well as schools nationwide, have suffered from a shortage of certified special education teachers. Placing teachers on waivers or permits had become common practice for filling special education teaching positions and threatened the effectiveness of education for children with disabilities (Darling-Hammond, 2001).

This study was used to examine the experiences of 12 paraprofessionals as they continued to work as paraprofessionals while taking classes at ETSU to become certified special education teachers. These examined experiences provided insight and clarity for other paraprofessionals who desired to be certified teachers. The study also provided research

involving special education teacher attrition providing state departments, local school systems, and institutes of higher education valuable information for present and future programs.

### *Statement of the Purpose*

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of 12 paraprofessionals who completed the first cohort program between the Tennessee Department of Education, ETSU, and Sevier County Schools. The study data are used to identify key themes that occurred as these paraprofessionals transitioned to certified teachers. The objective was also to recognize those cohort participants who had achieved such prestigious status as teacher and now served as an example to those who may aspire to travel the same path. The provided data reflected the positive outcomes of this new initiative in addressing teacher shortage in rural areas of East Tennessee.

### *Phenomenological Research Method*

Phenomenology was the qualitative method chosen to examine the experiences of those six paraprofessionals. The focus of the qualitative phenomenological study was to explore and examine the lived experience of each cohort participant's journey prior to becoming a certified special education teacher. Themes that emerged were coded and transcribed providing insight of the nature of the phenomenon as a means of sharing new ideas that may be beneficial for future research (Metler & Charles, 2008).

The 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Report to Congress Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) revealed paraprofessionals who provide services to students with disabilities consisted of more than half of the nonteaching personnel. These data demonstrated what potential this workforce, more than any other group, offered in addressing teacher shortages (U.S. DOE, 2000).

The researcher gathered data from multiple sources, the preponderance being from in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted with cohort participants and special education supervisors. The in-depth interview research questions are listed below.

### *Research Questions*

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of 12 cohort members who while continuing to work, went to college, and became certified teachers. The goal being to, in essence, collect lightning in a bottle, to get their perceptions and dive deep into their being in finding each person's personal and group experiences. All participants brought their experiences as paraprofessionals to the discussion. What if anything did this experience mean? The following research questions were designed to answer that question.

#### *Research Question 1*

In the perceptions of the cohort members of *The Paraprofessionals to Certified Teachers Project* and special education supervisors, how did the Tennessee Department of Education, East Tennessee State University, and Sevier County Schools combine resources to address teacher shortage in special education in East Tennessee?

#### *Research Question 2*

In the perceptions of the cohort members of *The Paraprofessionals to Certified Teachers Project* and special education supervisors did the creation of an alternative route to certify teachers prove to be appropriate in meeting teacher shortages in special education in East Tennessee?

### *Research Question 3*

What are the perceptions and lived experiences of the cohort members of *The Paraprofessionals to Certified Teachers Project* who completed the first East Tennessee State University-Sevier County Cohort prior to becoming a certified special education teacher?

These open-ended questions were designed to give extreme latitude in how they were to be answered. Research conducted by Leedy and Ormrod (2005) confirmed that researchers who chose the qualitative method did so with the purpose of interpreting narratives in their attempt to capture this lightning in a bottle. The end result was often the themes collected rendered more questions than answers providing a foundation for continued research (Creswell, 2006).

These research questions were the foundation in creating in-depth interview questions for interviewees, special education supervisors, and focus group members.

### *Significance of the Study*

Although there have been many studies addressing the shortage of special education teachers, until recently little has been done to address the problem of collecting data on how teachers enter the special education profession (Cook & Boe, 2007). Numerous studies examining persons who have made the transition from a nonteaching career to a second career as a certified teacher have been conducted (Council on Exceptional Children, 2000; Crow, Levine, & Nager, 1990). Data from the 1990s showed approximately 10% of teachers in special education were not certified. Even though these data were an approximate description, they could be even higher when taking into account other variables such as when local school districts decide to reduce class size or reduce the amount of services students with disabilities received (Darling-Hammond & Sclan, 1996; Smith-Davis & Billingsley, 1993).

One earlier study conducted by Mark and Anderson (1985) in St. Louis revealed the number of cohorts entering teacher certification programs decreased over time. Research conducted by Heyns (1988) of a 1972 National Longitudinal Study reflected that 25.2% of teachers completed teacher training programs and never pursued teaching careers. Then, and today, there continued to be a challenge of providing school systems certified special education teachers for students with disabilities (Nichols, Bicard, Bicard, & Casey, 2008).

Even though previous studies addressed the need for special education teachers, little data have been collected on those beginning teachers who entered institutes of higher education as paraprofessionals; specifically addressing the experiences they encountered as they made the transition from paraprofessional to certified teacher. Research to further address variables of self-efficacy, reflection, resiliency, and teacher retention are needed (Youst, 2006).

This study was used to provide experiences and reflections addressing teacher preparation and retention. Data collected provided insight for other paraprofessionals who are considering this pathway. The study also provided data to local school districts, state departments of education, and federal programs in forming strategies for teacher training and retention especially in rural areas.

### *Background of the Study*

Since the passage of the *IDEA*, teacher shortage in special education teachers, specifically in rural areas, has been a concern for federal, state, and local school districts (Special Education, 2001). This shortage continues to threaten not only rural areas but our nation as a whole in providing services to students with disabilities. A 2002 study by the U.S. Department of Education revealed of the 13.6 million special education students in American Schools, approximately 12.3% has teachers who were not certified (U.S. DOE, 2002a).

Furthermore, the study concluded that approximately 800, 000 students with disabilities are being taught by uncertified teachers with caseloads that average 16 students. Based on this fact, it was predicted shortages will continue into the next decade. Factors contributing to this shortage were projected increases in special education students, teachers retiring, and continued increases in the number of uncertified teachers (McKleskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004).

Other examples of the need for teachers in rural areas were a 6.8% increase in the number of all students from 1992-1999, while students with disabilities increased by over 20%. (The age of students with disabilities that require services under state and federal law range from 3-21 inclusive.) Increasing the challenge of attrition were data that revealed special education teachers leaving education outnumber those entering the field by over 50% (U.S. DOE, 2002b). Given this prognosis and the fact students with disabilities were required to be provided a *FAPE*, the charge of providing schools with certified special education teachers was daunting.

This study provided data to confirm the shortage of special education teachers in rural areas is a national epidemic and the recruitment of paraprofessionals into cohort programs such as the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort is an effective means of meeting this shortage (U.S. DOE, 2009).

### *Assumptions*

The assumption of this study was that the selected participants for the study have adjusted in their roles as teachers; that they have become comfortable in the teaching environment, and principals, supervisors, and other administrators were pleased with their work. It was also assumed that prior to becoming a teacher, the experiences of working as paraprofessionals provided them with a unique perspective on effective teaching (Abbate-Vaughn, 2007).

## *Limitations and Delimitations*

### *Limitations*

Due to the amount of time since graduating the cohort, recollecting experiences and providing detailed accounts of what occurred seemed to be challenging. The level of experience of the researcher posed a challenge. For that reason the researcher explored various forms of interview designs to ensure the questions captured rich and thick data from an investigational perspective (Creswell, 2007). Prior to interviewing the 12 chosen cohort participants, the researcher implemented a pilot test interview session. Pilot interviews were conducted with three paraprofessionals who completed a different ETSU-Sevier County Cohort Program than the one with the 12 chosen cohort participants. This pilot interview session provided the researcher experience in interviewing techniques and assisted in refining the interview questions that were posed to the cohort with the 12 participants selected for the study (Kvale, 2007).

### *Delimitations*

This study was delimited to 12 of the 16 members who completed the 2000-2004 ETSU-Sevier County Cohort. Information was gathered and triangulated through interviews with six cohort participants, focus group members, and their special education supervisors. The 2000 ETSU-Sevier County Cohort started with 16 members. Currently 13 are teaching in special education, one cohort member is deceased, and two cohort members moved so that the other members do not know of their status.

Relying solely on responses from in-depth interviews of cohort participants, focus group members, and special education supervisors could be considered a limitation. Obtaining input from other people associated with this group such as college professors and local administrators could have influenced the research findings.

Another possible limitation was that responses provided from cohort participants, focus group members, and special education supervisors were given to please the researcher. The design of the questions could have initiated more favorable responses.

### *Definitions*

The majority of educational literature has used the term paraprofessional and paraeducators synonymously. This study consistently used the term paraprofessional. The term paraprofessional is used in titles such as paraeducator, teacher assistant, teacher aide, classroom assistant, and instructional assistant. The term is synonymous with a person who works alongside teachers. They are usually women who work for low wages, have lived in the community all or most of their lives, and have a strong interest in the school and community (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2006). Research has shown them to be highly motivated, dedicated, and volunteer for training that will help them become more effective in helping students with disabilities (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2001).

The following are definitions from a variety of disciplines.

- Alternative Licensure Programs: Any significant departure from the traditional undergraduate program for teacher education in the university.
- Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification: State-defined routes through which an individual who already has at least a bachelor's degree can obtain certification to teach without necessarily having to go back to college and complete a college campus-based teacher education program (National Center for Education Information, 2008). However, the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort Program was defined somewhat differently from the National Center for Education Information. Many of the paraprofessionals who participated had taken some college courses or had associates degrees, while some did not. The grant was considered as



an alternative approach to receiving a bachelor's degree in special education in Tennessee (ETSU, 2009).

- **Attrition:** According to Boe, Bobbitt, and Cook (1997) a component of teacher turnover is due to teacher attrition (i.e. year-to-year changes in teacher status). Turnovers may be due to teachers changing fields such as going from special education to general education or a change in schools. The definition of attrition as it related to teachers exiting the field of special education either to teach in another field or exiting the profession altogether was used in this study.
- **Cohort Participant:** In conducting research, the term cohort is any group of people who share similar characteristics over a period of time (Merriam-Webster, 2012). This study used the term interviewee for those six cohort participants who were selected for individual interviews during this research.
- **Experiences:** Events that occurred during the journey from paraprofessional to certified teacher.
- **Focus Group:** A process of interviewing led by a moderator or facilitator where interaction is elicited between group members and the person leading the group. The questions are designed to extract responses and gain information from questions specific to the researcher's quest. This type of interviewing produces interactions that are detailed to the questions being addressed unlike information composed from surveys or observations. The accuracy of information being processed is collected by audio tape recordings (New York State Teacher Centers, 2008).
- **Focus Group Member:** A person who is a member of a group of people participating in a focus group activity.

- Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): Listed under the authority of U.S. C.1401(9), these are special education and related services provided at public expense and at no charge to the parent. They must meet the standards of the State Educational Agency to include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the state involved, and is provided in conformity with the child's individualized education program (IEP) that meets the requirements of Section 300.320 through 300.324 (U.S. Legal, 2012).
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): This act was formerly known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA; Public Law 94-142). This act became law in October 1, 1977 (Ballard, Ramirez, & Zantal-Weiner, 1987). The law was amended again in 1990, changing the name to the now current Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). The law was amended again in 1997, with final regulations clarified on March 12, 1999. The basis of this law was school systems are required to provide a FAPE to individuals with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 22 (Ballard, et al., 1987; National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012).
- Institutes of Higher Education (IHE): The basic definition of institute of higher education is as follows: An educational institute residing in a state that: (a) admits persons who have completed a high school diploma or equivalent thereof; (b) has been granted authorization by the state the institute resides in to provide a secondary program for those who are admitted; (c) provides educational programs in which students receive a bachelor's degree or beyond or provides a 2-year educational program resulting in the student receiving credit that will transfer to a graduate or professional degree program all of which are subject to review by the Secretary; (d) is deemed a public or other not for profit institution; (e) has received accreditation from a nationally recognized agency, or; if the institute has not received

accreditation by such an association or agency has been given the status of preaccreditation, which was recognized or will be recognized within a reasonable length of time and approved by the Secretary (Cornell University Law School, n.d.).

- Paraprofessional:
  - a. The prefix *para* is derived from the Greek meaning *alongside of* and/or *akin to*. The term has been common for years in fields such as medicine and law. The National Education Association's (NEA) definition of paraprofessionals is a person providing specific instruction to a student or students and/or parents; and a person who is under a professional teacher or other professional who is ultimately responsible for the design, implementation, and evaluation of student progress and instructional programming (National Education Association, 2005).
  - b. A paraprofessional is a person employed by a school system who performs specific duties as prescribed by a certified teacher or professional practitioner (Ruedel, Diamond, Zaidi, & Aboud, 2001).
  - c. Anna Lou Pickett, the founder of the National Research Center for Paraprofessionals (NRCPP) and a nationally known expert in paraprofessional issues, stated in 1999 that paraprofessionals are school agency employees whose positions are either instructional in nature or who provide other direct services to children, youth, and/or their families. Paraprofessionals work under the supervision of teachers or other professional practitioners who are responsible for the design, implementation, and assessment of learner progress and the evaluation of effectiveness of learning programs and related services for children, youth, and/or their families. Other titles may include: paraprofessional, teacher aide or assistant, education technician, transition trainer, job

coach, therapy assistant, home visitor, and others (Pickett, 1999). It is important to note the technically educated assistant and paraeducators are seen as synonymous (as both are assistants to the profession), and both are involved in the definition of paraprofessional as previously stated.

- d. The National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Education and Related Services recommends the following:
  - i. Paraprofessionals are defined as employees:
    - 1. Whose specific positions are either instructional in nature or who deliver other district or indirect services to children, youth, and/or their parents; and
    - 2. Who work under the supervision of teachers or other professionals who have the ultimate responsibility for
      - a. The design and implementation of education and related service programs, and
      - b. The assessment of the impact on student progress and other education outcomes (Pickett, 1994).
      - c. A school employee who works under the supervision of a certified or licensed professional to support and assist in providing instruction and other services to students and families (Pickett & Gerlach, 1997).
- Transition: Life experiences that occur from the time the paraprofessional decided to become a teacher and then entered the teaching profession that causes participants to make adjustments.

### *Overview of the Study*

The study was organized into five chapters. Chapter 1, Introduction, presents the Introduction and Statement of the Purpose, including a brief history, Purpose of the Study, Background of the Study, what was done previously to address teacher shortage, Assumptions, Limitations and Delimitations, and Definitions. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature along with the foundational framework for my study. This chapter included a History of Paraprofessionals, the National Perspective on Teacher Shortage, Tennessee's Attempt to Address Teacher Shortage, Culture and Changing Demographics in East Tennessee, Alternative Routes to Certification, and Profile of Teachers in the United States. Chapter 3 provides reference and research material in relation to the history of paraprofessionals, teacher shortage, and teacher attrition. Efforts toward teacher retention were discussed and included how these all related to the demand for certified special education teachers in rural areas. Chapter 4 summarizes the findings of the study. Chapter 5 provides researcher conclusions of the study and explained the experiences of 12 cohort participants as they transitioned from paraprofessionals to certified teachers. It also contains recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chapter 2 is a review of literature beginning with the history of paraprofessionals in the 1940s to present day. Examples of alternative educational programs and alternative routes to teacher certification are discussed along with a national perspective on teacher shortage. Tennessee's attempt in addressing teacher shortage is explained including past and present programs. The East Tennessee State University-Sevier Cohort Grant Program initiative is discussed highlighting the grants proposal in addressing teacher shortages in rural East Tennessee. Sevier County demographics and the challenges rural schools face in meeting teacher shortages are discussed along with findings from other similar state grants. The chapter ends with a profile of how traditional routes compared to alternative routes to teacher certification have changed over the past 3 decades.

#### *History of Paraprofessionals*

##### *Paraprofessionals in the 1940s*

Paraprofessionals have been a part of the educational landscape for over 6 decades. Their roots began in the 1940s with titles such as aides to teachers. The majority of these 'aids' first worked in larger school districts performing nonteaching tasks ranging from clerical duties, bookkeeping, to household chores. One job description included watering plants and caring for class pets (Hultgren, 2004).

##### *Paraprofessionals in the 1950s*

The paraprofessional movement in the 1950s was focused more on the objective of looking at other options for providing educational services to students (Pickett, 1995). As soon as World War II was over, teacher shortage began forcing schools to look at other available options

for meeting educational needs (Jones & Bender, 1993). Michigan's Bay City School District started one of the first programs for hiring paraprofessionals in meeting these needs. Teachers required more time to teach and paraprofessionals were hired to perform tasks such as clerical duties and in many situations household chores. A lot has changed over the years. Names and title, such as assistant, teacher aide, and paraeducators have been added over the years in describing these educational providers (Pickett, 1995).

### *Paraprofessionals in the 1960s*

In the 1960s the majority of paraprofessionals' duties were clerical in nature (Turney, 1962). A few went back to school, enrolling in after school and summer classes, earning their degree with their own money. There were a handful of programs that provided financial assistance, one being for Vietnam veterans (Gursky, 2000).

In 1967 Congress, in recognizing the concern of the nation's inadequate supply of public school teachers enacted the *Education Profession Development Act*, the emphasis being on providing training for education personnel who worked with handicapped students. Congress realized that although previous legislation had been passed with good intent in meeting the needs of the handicapped, in reality this was not the case. The Office of Education indicated at that time approximately 60% of handicapped students between the ages of 5 and 17 were not receiving the specialized services needed. Approximately \$7 million dollars were given to 48 states representing the largest funding ever awarded for training and recruiting personnel to serve the handicapped (Hitt, 1969).

Another beginning program promoting paraprofessionals to return to school was the 1967 *Education Profession Development Act (EPDA)*. During this time a program called Career Opportunities Program (COP) was passed with the purpose of increasing minority teachers,

increasing parent involvement, assisting low income students and families, increasing teacher quality, and increasing and improving teacher education programs for underprivileged families and children living in poverty (Kaplan, 1977).

With the historic case of *Brown v. Board of Education* paving the way, the 1960s brought with it a group of advocates, parents, and educators pushing for all children, specifically children with disabilities, to be provided a *Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)*. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* case provided the foundation in establishing due process rights for parents in challenging school districts to provide these services (The National Center for Public Research, n.d.).

In 1966 Congress passed the *Bureau for Education of the Handicapped Act* under Title VI of the *Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESEA)*. This was the first trickle of federal money designated for serving children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education [DOE], 2000).

As advocates for students with disabilities continued in their quest for federal money, federal programs like Head Start, a program designed to support low income and diverse learning students, remained intact (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). As the flow of money became wider and programs began to be established across the nation, they eventually became codified under a single law that became known as *The Education of All Handicapped Act (Public Law 91-230)*, which was passed in 1970 (Martin et al., 1996). This newly earmarked money gave school districts the opportunity to hire more paraprofessionals. This added money also increased their job responsibilities; adding duties such as monitoring playgrounds, hall duty, and bus duty. This, in turn, provided teachers more time to plan lessons and provide instruction. This was also



the beginning shift for paraprofessionals in assisting students with instruction (Jones & Bender, 1993).

#### *Paraprofessionals in the 1970s*

In 1971 and 1972 two landmarked Federal court decisions, *Pennsylvania Associations for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania of 1971* and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Colombia of 1972* maintained the education of students with disabilities is the responsibility of the state in which they reside. This decision was derived from the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution (U.S. DOE, 1995). As states realized the impact of funding being placed on them, they immediately joined advocate groups in their quest for federal dollars. This resulted in passing legislation to provide consistency in funding (Martin et al., 1996).

By 1975 it became obvious to Congress that millions of children with disabilities were still not receiving an appropriate education. *The Education of All Handicapped Act (EAHCA*; Peterson, 2007) prompted the passage of *Public Law 94-142* by including the clause; all students with disabilities would receive a *Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)*. Local school districts immediately began to increase the number of paraprofessionals in meeting the needs of these students.

#### *Paraprofessionals in the 1980s*

The 1980 decade placed more emphasis on serving students with disabilities in the general curriculum and not in segregated classes. Madeline Will, former Director for the Federal Office of Special Education, placed a major emphasis on this inclusive movement (Stevens, Everington, & Kozar-Kocsis, 2002). The inclusion movement not only promoted schools to consider *FAPE* in the *Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)* but students with disabilities begin to

be included in their neighborhood schools and eventually into general education programs with their nondisabled peers (Stevens et al., 2002). This movement prompted school systems to recognize the beginning of the paraprofessional to certification pathway.

### *Examples of Alternative Programs*

New York was one of the first systems to establish a pilot program paying paraprofessional to attend school full time while earning a degree. One example of the success of this program was Ron Miller, a former paraprofessional who became principal. “I think it helps me to have been a para, a teacher, and now a supervisor because I have all those perspectives” (as cited in Gursky, 2000, p. 8).

Other examples of preparation programs and their effect on local school districts go back to 1959 when federal funding for leadership doctoral programs in special education began. At that time, 14 doctoral programs were in existence. During the first year funding was allocated for 15 participants. This program was titled Graduate Fellowship Programs for the Preparation of Leadership Personnel in the Education of Mentally Retarded Children. By 1961 doctoral programs in 21 universities were initiated (Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010).

The 1987 Teacher Education Division program directory of the Council for Exceptional Children listed 85 special education doctoral programs. The intent of these programs was to increase capacity building and promote effective practices in serving students with disabilities. This was an example of how federal incentive programs work when properly managed (Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2001).

The passage of the *2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act* created new roles and responsibilities for paraprofessionals. In Tennessee this law required paraprofessionals to become highly qualified. To meet this status they must have:

- Completed 2 years of study in an institute of higher education or obtained an associate degree or higher degree; or
- Passed a test demonstrating knowledge and ability in specific content area (reading, writing, and mathematics) with the ability to assist students in those specific content areas; or
- Passed a locally designed test approved by the Department of Education demonstrating competence in a specific area (Tennessee State DOE, 2005).

In keeping with the inclusion mandate, the 2004 *Individuals with Disabilities Act* was amended with emphasis on children being educated in the LRE. To further clarify this meaning, in 2006 the U.S. DOE, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and Rehabilitative Services defined LRE as:

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in private or public institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplemental aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (Whaley, 2011, p. 5)

For paraprofessionals, the mandates of the *IDEA 2004* created new roles and responsibilities. With the continued shortage of certified special education teachers, the definition of LRE specific to appropriate aids and supports placed many paraprofessionals in the regular classroom providing these required supports. Teachers both in special education and general education needed paraprofessionals to assist in providing access to the general curriculum. Paraprofessionals were put into the role of providing direct instruction for many students. Inclusion was provided in many classes with the paraprofessional remaining in the general education classroom to assist in whatever role the teacher deemed necessary in meeting the students individualized education program (IEP). The mandates of *IDEA 2004* were also reflective of the 2003 Rules of State Board of Education that stated, “Appropriately Trained and

Supervised” (Tennessee’s Early Intervention System, 2003, p. 1) as it applied to paraprofessional staff, means the training, experience, and supervision of paraprofessionals was consistent with the professional standards established by state requirements for their profession.

Even though the passing of *NCLB* was a federal mandate, it was the responsibility of individual states to initiate. In 2003 the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) conducted a survey of all 50 states and found only 9 states that had programs designed to train paraprofessionals. Three years later the AFT completed a follow-up survey and found 33 states had provided paraprofessional training (American Federation of Teachers, 2006).

Although many states were increasing their efforts in training paraprofessionals, a study conducted by Giangreco (2010) revealed that literature reviews continue to expose a lack of training for paraprofessionals in special education. The study states that a double standard existed between general education paraprofessionals and special education paraprofessionals, suggesting that general education paraprofessionals were held to a higher standard and received more instructional training (Giangreco, 2010).

The most recent Reauthorization of *IDEA* entitled the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)* became effective July 1, 2005 (Valentino, 2006). Examples of changes in the 2005 reauthorization include: a more detailed description of how the student is progressing in meeting annual goals; focusing more on student outcomes rather than procedural safeguards; ensuring all special education and related services provided are done so based on peer-reviewed research; reduce the burden of paperwork placed on special education teachers; require all special education teachers to be highly qualified; do away with short-term objectives and benchmarks (Valentino, 2006).

Previous to this reauthorization, the case of *Board of Education v. Rowley* was viewed as setting IEP measurements as students receiving some educational benefiter. The *IDEIA* amendments outlined that provisions in the IEP must be more rigorous and provide what is deemed appropriate. In order to receive *FAPE*, students with disabilities must receive services from qualified, trained, and competent staff (King, 2009).

Although no wording in the reauthorization was specific to paraprofessionals, many systems have trained paraprofessionals providing services as written in the IEP. It is evident over the history of paraprofessionals their duties and responsibilities have changed dramatically. Many of these changes and added responsibilities have been the direct result of teacher shortage.

A goal of the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort grant was to add to the number of appropriately certified special education teachers in East Tennessee. Members who completed the cohort would leave the program with a sound knowledge for meeting the needs of the special education students they would soon be serving. Examples of teacher knowledge and skills include:

- Use of technology.
- Strategies for developing teamwork.
- Writing and initiating behavioral plans.
- Developing assessment skills.
- Providing individual and group instruction.
- Selecting and using appropriate instructional techniques.
- Writing IEPs that link instructional strategies that place students in the least restrictive environment.

- Using assessment instruments in determining appropriate goals and benchmarks for individual students.

These types of cohorts had the potential to produce high quality teachers. Their background of working as paraprofessionals could be a huge advantage in assisting or mentoring the paraprofessional(s) assigned to them.

### *National Perspective on Teacher Shortage*

Over the past 2 decades shortages in the number of special education teachers in the United States have remained at the top; even higher than the demand for math and science teachers (U.S. DOE, 2009).

#### *Shortage of Certified Special Education Teachers*

Since *The Education of All Handicapped Act (Public Law 94-142)* was passed in 1975, guaranteeing the right of children with disabilities to enroll in public school, there has and continues to be a shortage of properly certified teachers to educate them (Darling-Hammond, 1994a). The 2008 American Association of Employment in Education Executive Summary indicates special education continues to be an area of need with few preparation training programs available. The report also indicated that not only does there continue to be a teacher shortage but the added requirements of the *NCLB Act* that special education teachers be highly qualified has created a continuous burden on this needed supply (American Association for Employment in Education, 2008).

The 20<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to Congress reported on the implementation of the *IDEA*. The OSEP and other major supply and demand studies in special education have documented a persistent shortage of fully certified special education teachers for public schools in America (U.S. DOE, 1998). Most teachers in hard-to-staff schools were new and poorly prepared. Many

teacher education programs did not prepare teachers for hard-to-staff schools (Darling-Hammond, 1994b).

### *Teacher Quality*

Teacher quality was a particular concern in rural and urban schools. Over 50, 000 teachers annually have been entering with emergency or temporary certificates with little or no preparation at all. In 2003 more than 53, 000 special education teachers were needed in the states and territories to replace teachers who were less than fully certified (U.S. DOE, 2003).

According to Boe and Cook (2006) approximately 99% of open special education teaching positions were filled; indicating teacher shortages in special education were due, not to the unavailability of individuals willing to accept the open position, but to an insufficient supply of fully certified teachers. Their data indicated that approximately 32% of all entering special education teachers and 7.8 % of continuing special education teachers were not fully certified.

For decades, there simply have not been enough qualified personnel to address the educational needs of the growing numbers of students with disabilities. Moreover, the traditional sources of supply for special education classrooms--freshly minted graduates of college or university degree programs--have not been able to meet the current and growing demand for teachers. (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005, p. 1)

### *Alternative Pathways*

Research conducted by Rosenberg and Sindelar (2005) reflected alternative pathways to increase certification in special education has become a product and demand industry. There continued to be a shortage of certified special education teachers with traditional pathways doing little in meeting the supply. Given this prognosis and the increasing number of students with disabilities, the need to develop creative and innovative alternatives for certification was a rational conclusion.

### *Lack of Data Addressing Teacher Shortage*

Concerns regarding teacher shortages were not just a special education issue. Richard Ingersoll, former professor at the University of Pennsylvania, who is nationally recognized as an expert in the recruitment and training of teachers (Ingersoll, 2003) had undertaken a series of research projects over the past decade using data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and the Teacher Follow up Survey (TFS). The United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conceived of the SASS and TFS in response to a lack of empirical data on teacher shortages (Ingersoll, 2003).

The data from the NCES indicated teacher shortages were not due to an insufficient supply of qualified teachers coming out of teacher preparation programs but a problem of teachers transferring to another position or relocating to another school district (Ingersoll, 2003). Additionally, Ingersoll proposed the most effective way to address perceived teacher shortage should be an organizational issue, and should be dealt with where the processes occur. It was within the schools and school districts that teacher supply, demand, and turnover must be addressed.

### *Lack of Diversity in Teacher Recruitment*

The prevailing policy approach, however, has been to address teacher shortage by increasing the number of teachers. States and school districts have taken a multi-dimensional approach to recruiting more teachers. One such approach was to recruit paraprofessionals to become teachers. Fields especially benefitting from paraprofessionals-to-teachers were special education and minority education. Over 32% of all public school students came from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. They, in turn, were served by a 13.5% minority teaching



force. To further compound the lack of diversity among the nation's teachers, more than 40% of all public schools have no minority teachers at all (Henke, Choy, & Geis, 1996).

### *Paraprofessionals as Teachers*

Paraprofessionals were more likely than teachers to live in the community and share the cultural and linguistic features of the students they serve. Paraprofessionals were perceived as more likely to come into the profession with knowledge and skills and have a higher retention rate (Leake & Black, 2005).

To help meet these demands Alternative Routes to Certification (ARC) have been termed a growth industry (Feistritzer, Haar, Hobar, & Looselyong, 2004). These programs vary depending on need and geographic location.

### *Alternative Routes to Certification*

Alternative Routes to Certification (ARC) was somewhat difficult to define as there were many and greatly varied programs across the nation. Basically, ARC was a program that allows a route to teacher certification that did not follow the typical teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities. ARC programs were so varied that Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, and Misra (2007) suggested that treating them as a homogenous group was no longer reasonable. Instead, they proposed teacher preparation was best described as a continuum along which the point the ARC programs and traditional teacher preparation programs begin and end was no longer clearly delineated.

Nationwide there were approximately 600 different alternative certification programs in 48 states. However, Alaska and Oregon did not recognize ARC (Williamson, 2011). In 2004, 43 states had 144 alternate route programs according to Rosenberg and Sindelar (2005) and Rosenberg et al. (2007). This proliferation caused ARC to be termed a growth industry

(Feistritzer et al., 2004). Additionally, this rapid route to placing teachers in the classroom was challenging previously held beliefs that teacher certification must follow completion of a standard college or university program. Those standard programs still account for the majority of teachers in America's schools, but the landscape continued to change rapidly. Today, one in five newly placed teachers have come to the classroom through ARC programs (Williamson, 2011).

ARC programs were not completely new. The National Center for Education Information (NCEI) in a published report stated:

In the mid-1980s a few states started creating alternative routes to teacher certification, which were designed for the explicit purpose of attracting individuals who already had at least a bachelor's degree – usually in a field other than education – into the teaching profession. Since the mid-1980s, hundreds of such alternative programs have been created and are being implemented in nearly every state. (Feistritzer, 2011, p. 9)

These ARC programs are now producing approximately about 60, 000 new teachers per year (National Center for Alternative Certification, 2011).

### *Teach for America*

In 1989 Wendy Kopp was an idealistic college student working on her senior thesis (Teach for America, 2012). Out of that thesis project, Teach for America (TFA) was created and has become one of the biggest players in education reform in America. Young college graduates, with strong academic records and leadership potential, were recruited to teach in low performing, high poverty schools. TFA now attracts 20, 000 recent college graduates for 2, 500 teaching positions. It has become the Peace Corps for elite graduates who want to give back to their country. TFA recruits committed to working in the public schools for a minimum of 2 years. They received 5 weeks of intensive training during the summer and were placed in a classroom when school started in the fall (Teach for America, 2012).

In 1991 the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools in North Carolina teamed up with TFA. That partnership continues today and is considered a valuable asset to the district's ongoing efforts to

place qualified teachers. Ann Clark, the Chief Academic Officer in Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, said “We want an effective teacher in every classroom and TFA helps us do that faster” (Williamson, 2011, from Stopgap to Pipeline, para. 5). Clark expected to use approximately 300 TFA members during the 2011-12 school year (Williamson, 2011). TFA was but one of the more than 600 ARC programs nationwide. The one essential element in alternate routes was they are a fast track way to get qualified teachers in the classroom (Teach for America, 2012).

### *Demographics*

The ARC programs have produced more than just a fast track to teaching. According to the NCEI report 22% of teachers entering through alternate routes were male as opposed to 16% entering through traditional campus-based teacher preparation programs (Feistritzer, 2011). Although not nearly as diverse as our society, 30% of the teachers entering through alternate routes were minority, whereas only 23% of teachers from traditional teacher preparation programs were minority. The teaching profession remains predominately white and female, but it appeared ARC programs have the potential to improve that statistic (Feistritzer, 2011).

### *The New Teacher Project*

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) is a nonprofit organization, founded by Michelle Rhee in 1997 for the purpose of providing minority students and who live in poverty the same educational opportunities as all students. One specific goal of the TNPT is to recruit, train, and retrain high level staff in raising student achievement (The New Teacher Project [TNTP], 2013).

### *Alternative Program Candidates*

Who are the teachers who enter the classrooms via ARC programs? Some are college graduates who did not plan to enter teaching as a profession; some were former military; some

were retired from other occupations; some were former paraprofessionals; some were on emergency certificates or waivers; and some entered through structured programs such TFA and TNTP. Potential clients go through a rigorous interview process when applying for a position with TFA. Even though a potential client may have an extensive background with a litany of degrees and experience, he or she must prove to those interviewing about his or her true belief in high standards for all students (TNTP, 2013).

### *Preservice Programs*

One question that was constant in educational research; what constitutes an effective preservice program for preparing prospective teachers? Many researchers argued the traditional approach was not proven to be effective. The Abell Foundation developed a report in 2001 discussing the pros and cons of how teachers received certification that concluded with serious doubts about the effectiveness of the traditional approach (Walsh, 2001).

In the Secretary of Education's 2002 Annual Report regarding Teacher Quality, the following statement was made:

Universities may well have to transform their preparation and certification systems, by basing their programs on rigorous academic content, eliminating cumbersome requirements not based on scientific evidence, and doing more to attract highly qualified candidates from a variety of fields. (U.S. DOE, 2002b, p. viii)

### *Alternative Certification*

One study conducted on alternative certification program for special education teachers was by Rosenberg and Sindelar (2005). They concluded a key factor of alternative certification programs is the mentoring component provided at the local level. Another large component of successful alternative certification programs was the involvement of institutes of higher learning. Sound partnerships by local universities and school districts in the planning and implementation

of alternative certification programs were shown to be much more effective than other teacher preparation programs (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005).

### *Grow Your Own*

The State of Illinois was on the front end of what has been coined as the Grow Your Own (GYO) initiative. A project designed to recognize, prepare, and provide work for persons within low income families who have cultural ties to that community; emphasis being on the promotion of community development between the school and family (Logan Square Neighborhood Association, 2012).

### *Traditional Approaches to Certification*

Many researchers have conducted studies stating the traditional model of teacher preparation were more favorable. Nougaret, Scruggs, and Mastropieri (2005) reported findings from teacher rating scales that revealed the traditional route as being more favorable when compared to those who were given an emergency licensure. Another study conducted by Sindelar, Daunic, and Rennells (2004) showed those completing traditional preparation programs were further ahead in instruction than those in alternative programs. Other studies have focused on the importance of institutions of higher education and paying greater attention in the areas of methodology and pedagogy (Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003). The National Center for Educational Statistics estimated that approximately a third of beginning teachers leave teaching within the first 3 years to pursue other careers (Youst, 2006).

### *Alternative vs. Traditional*

Even though about a third of beginning teachers leave in their first 3 years, others maintained the focus should not be on developing alternative pathways to solve teacher shortage but focusing more on training and developing those beginning teachers who would stay if

provided appropriate mentoring and teacher preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2003). As these debates over traditional v. alternative certification programs continued, it was evident concerns continued that open the door for dialogue on how best to prepare future special education teachers in meeting teacher shortages (Thornton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007).

### *Role of the Federal Government Regarding Teacher Shortages*

For years the federal government recognized the need for states to address teacher shortages. Data continued to reflect the need for states to make teacher recruitment a high priority. In the 1990s the number of special education students with disabilities grew at a pace three times greater than that of the total student population (U.S. DOE, 1999).

Over the past 2 decades there continued to be a shortage of certified special education teachers needed to teach those students. Adding to this challenge was the predicted continued increase of students with disabilities and the decrease of certified special education teachers. Even though states initiated strategies and programs for teacher recruitment, present data reflect that by 2016 there will be a 15% increase in needed special education teachers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2007).

Due to the demand for meeting the shortage of special education teachers along with NCLB standards, the U.S. Department of Education approved the development of a large number of alternative licensure programs. One example of these efforts was the push for states to address teacher recruitment efforts specifically in the development of alternative licensure programs encouraging states to develop web sites for attracting potential candidates (Rosenberg et al., 2007).

To further prod states to improve in teacher recruitment the federal government initiated the National Center to Improve Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Personnel for Children

with Disabilities. The goal was to increase the number of certified special education teachers in all states (Personnel Improvement Center, n.d.).

With all the attention from the Federal Government toward states to address teacher shortages, what did Tennessee do in this effort?

### *Tennessee's Attempt to Address Teacher Shortage*

While national studies on teacher shortages and teacher attrition continued to loom, a study presented from Tennessee Tomorrow, a partnership made up of state-wide academic leaders, presented a wakeup call to the Tennessee State Department of Education, the State Board of Education, the Tennessee Higher Education Commission, and the P-12 Council, describing Tennessee's predicament as follows:

Next to the family, a teacher is the single most influential factor in a child's learning. A competent, caring, qualified teacher will make a difference in a child's life. Why then are new teachers leaving the teaching profession early in their careers? 42% of new teachers will leave the teaching profession in Tennessee in the first five years of a career. This survey project gives insight into the reasons, and it is an important step in improving teacher retention in Tennessee. (Tennessee Tomorrow, Inc., 2002, p. 3)

The survey not only provided an analysis of teacher attrition in Tennessee but through surveys found out why many teachers left and made suggestions for teacher retention.

### *Tennessee's Plan for Teacher Attrition*

In December 2006 the State of Tennessee, Offices of Research and Education Accountability (OREA) issued a report entitled State Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools (State of Tennessee Office of Research and Education Accountability [OREA], 2006). Findings from this report indicated the following: "Tennessee does not have a strong or funded new teacher program and teacher recruitment continues to be a problem" (p. 5). In conjunction with these findings Tennessee developed a plan, which was approved by the U.S. Department of Education, to address teacher shortage that began in response to the *NCLB Act of*

2001. This initiative, the Tennessee Plan for Implementing the Teacher and Paraprofessional Quality Provisions of the *NCLB Act of 2001*, was to ensure all teachers and paraprofessionals met the highly qualified status (Tennessee State DOE, 2005). The focus was to demonstrate teachers and paraprofessionals were competent in subject matter. What the plan did not address was teacher shortage, specifically in poor and rural districts, along with a plan to recruit teachers to fill those positions (State of Tennessee, OREA, 2006). Even though Tennessee had developed initiatives such as the Teach Tennessee (TEACH-TN), Transition to Teaching, and Troops to Teachers, little data had been produced showing positive effects of these programs. Interviews of school district staff regarding their impact indicate they had little effect and many did not know about the programs. In 2002 the Dewitt Wallace Pathway Foundations Program received funding from the United States Department of Education for what was termed Grow Your Own, a program designed to retain local teachers. Findings from this program indicated the result of concentrated planning was a key in preparing professionals to become teachers (DeVita, 1997; State of Tennessee, OREA, 2006).

#### *Become a Special Educator in Tennessee (BASE-TN)*

Another initiative designed specifically for recruiting special education teachers in Tennessee was Become a Special Educator in Tennessee (BASE-TN). BASE-TN provided free tuition for those applicants chosen. Twelve universities and colleges across Tennessee participated in this program. In 2005-2006 it was reported 173 of 349 candidates participating in this program were employed as special education teachers (State of Tennessee, OREA, 2006).

Carson Newman University, in Jefferson County, in the Eastern Region of Tennessee, recently became a BASE-TN provider. Those participants selected to participate were required to teach 2 years for every year they are enrolled in the BASE-TN program (Tennessee Department



of Education, 2012). What was interesting about findings from the State Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools was that there was no mention of the grant between ETSU and Sevier County that began in 2000 (State of Tennessee, OREA, 2006).

#### *East Tennessee State University-Sevier County Cohort Grant Program*

This grant was specifically designed to address the shortage of special education teachers in rural areas of East Tennessee. The grant recruited paraprofessionals to attend ETSU while continuing to work in their respective school. In 2000 Jack Parton, Director of Schools for Sevier County, Tennessee, approached Joseph Fisher, the Assistant Commissioner for the Tennessee Department of Education, Division of Special Education, with a grant proposal that would provide funding for paraprofessionals to go back to school for certification as a special education teacher. Parton presented Fisher information showing the struggle that not only Sevier County had each year in filling vacant special education teacher positions but that many of those hired because they had a special education certification (J. Parton, personal communication, March 10, 2012). Parton explained the strengths of their grant proposal were in three areas:

- Local paraprofessionals were available and eager to participate with a solid history of dedication and experience;
- Sevier County has had a strong history of working with East Tennessee State University (Johnson City Press, 2011). In a December 2011 article from the Johnson City Press, ETSU's effect on rural Tennessee specified the alliance between Sevier County, Covenant Health, the Sevier County Board of Education, and ETSU as having even further implications. As one spokesperson for ETSU's academic outreach program commented, if you walk through the hallways of any school in Sevier County you will find teachers who graduated from ETSU. Another comment from the executive director of Sevier County Economic Development

Council who is very involved with ETSU contracts discussed the excitement around the prospect of students graduating with an educational degree from ETSU and not having to leave the county (Johnson City Press, 2011).

- Sevier County Schools already had a cadre of professionals available and prepared to teach.

A contract was written with a scope of services that included,

The grantee shall provide courses needed by participants to earn a licensure in Special Education I either modified K-12, comprehensive K-12, or Early Childhood, and the grantee shall provide tuition and an allowance for fees, materials, and books for either on-ground or Regents On-Line Degree Program (RODP) graduate or undergraduate courses for all participants. (State of Tennessee, DOE, 2009, p. 1)

#### *Results of the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort*

Since that time 39 paraprofessionals have completed the cohort program. The first graduating class of 2004 had 16 members. The second graduating class of 2009 had 14 members, seven of whom were hired by Sevier County; the other seven were hired in surrounding counties. Of the 39 participants who completed the cohort program, one member is deceased and one member moved from the area (S. Enloe, personal communication, May 10, 2011).

#### *Other Studies Relating to Tennessee's Teacher Shortages*

In 2001 the Southern Regional Resource Education Board indicated in a report entitled Workforce Shortage of Special Educators that in Tennessee the concerns of shortages in special education teacher's occupied two specific areas:

- "Lack of special education teachers that were properly trained and;
- Lack of planning to address the projected increase of students with disabilities" (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d., Workforce Shortage of Special Educators, para. 1).

According to Lynn Boyer head of the National Clearing House for Professionals in Special Education "The shortage of special education teachers has reached a crisis that must be

addressed” (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d., Resources - Making Career Decisions as a Special Educator, para. 1). The report further stated “Joseph Fisher, the Tennessee Assistant Commissioner for Special Education, is committed to the preparation, placement and retention of highly qualified special educators in all Tennessee schools” (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d., Workforce Shortage of Special Educators, para. 1).

The state of Tennessee was mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 to have an Advisory Council. This Tennessee Advisory Council’s (TAC) purpose is to provide policy guidance relating to all special education and related services involving students with disabilities in Tennessee. Examples of initiatives the advisory council supports were TEACH TN and BASE-TN both designed to address teacher shortages (Tennessee Advisory Council for Education of Students with Disabilities, 2011).

### *Culture and Changing Demographics in East Tennessee*

#### *Sevier County Demographics*

Sevier County, located in the middle section of East Tennessee, is the primary entranceway into is the most visited National Park in the nation, The Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Sevier County is also home to one of the most visited theme parks, Dollywood, named after the famous country singer Dolly Parton. Both have one thing in common, they are tourist attractions that bring over nine million visitors each year along with millions of dollars for the local economy (Doran, 2008).

#### *Challenges of a Transient Population*

What was often overlooked, and a huge challenge for Sevier County and other surrounding counties, was the growing number of transient workers with little to no marketable skills displaced throughout the area. These unskilled laborers provided work for local industries

such as restaurant waiters, motel maids, landscape workers, construction workers, theme park attendants, etc. One interesting change in the local demographics was the increased number of cabins and cottages scattered throughout the mountain side built for weekend visitors and tourists. Over the past 2 decades this movement forced motel and hotel owners to revisit how they were to maintain their business profits. In effect, many have become housing industries for short- and long-term transient workers. Not all were transient; many stayed, living in motels, hotels, or trailer parks. This change forced Sevier County to re-examine how it provided an appropriate education for all the children these families bring with them. The majority of these students were from low income families and many have learning disabilities. Even though these students were under the supervision of local teachers, paraprofessionals were often on the front line when providing individual assistance. In essence, paraprofessionals could be the most important link between the school and family. Evidence of this could be found in the following research. Many paraprofessionals lived in the same community as their students and were providing cultural and linguistic stability (Chopra et al., 2004).

#### *Paraprofessionals as Connectors*

Reports from parents reflected they see paraprofessionals as being major connectors between family and school (French & Chopra, 1999). Many educators saw the value paraprofessionals contributed to the school and community and viewed them as prospective teachers in reaching limited English Language Learners (ELL), specifically minorities. They viewed them as being more sensitive to students who had challenges in speaking English stability (Chopra et al., 2004).

Producing home grown teachers through the paraprofessional to professional path ensured these parents were more comfortable and involved when trust was established in the

relationship between school and home. These home grown programs produced capable teachers who not only understand local culture but would remain in the community (Clewell & Villegas, 2001).

#### *California's Paraprofessional to Certified Teachers Program (PTTP)*

In examining the paraprofessional to teacher models, California's School Paraprofessional Teacher Training Program (PTTP) that was established in 1990 enabling paraprofessionals to become certified teachers was a great example of collaborative efforts that work between state and local agencies. Not only did this program provide financial support it went much further in providing ongoing support (Fairgood, 2011).

After completing the PTTP program graduates entered the Beginning Teacher Support Assessment (BTSA) program to complete an induction program that built upon the skills of the newly credentialed teacher and supported him or her through the first 2 years of certification employment. PTTP program sponsors that placed a focus on recruitment of paraprofessionals sought special education certificates also had a collaborative relationship with the Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA). These collaborative relationships resulted in enrichment for PTTP participants, as the skills and knowledge paraprofessionals already possessed were enhanced by the academic support offered by the local BSTA and SELPA. This additional support facilitated participant's success in fulfilling degree and certification requirements (Fairgood, 2011).

#### *Beginning Teacher Support Assessment Program (BSTA)*

As soon as these paraprofessionals graduated from college they were assigned to a school and entered into the Beginning Teacher Support Assessment (BSTA) Program. The BSTA is a 2-year program designed to provide support and continued training for these newly credentialed

teachers. The Paraprofessional Teacher Training Program School (PTTP) also worked in relationship results in increasing the enhancement, enrichment, knowledge, and skills these paraprofessionals already possessed. The working relationship between BSTA and SELPA not only enhanced academic support for local interim participants but provided additional support in helping participant's complete certification and degree requirements (Fairgood, 2011).

*No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Effect toward Teacher Shortage in Rural Areas*

Even though school administrators in rural districts understood the challenge they faced in teacher attrition, from a national perspective the *NCLB Act* did little to acknowledge the impact of this law in rural areas. From their standpoint addressing teacher shortage was minimal; provide students with bright energetic professional teachers and the problem was eliminated. For those rural systems this was very misguided (Schwartzbeck & Prince, 2003).

Immediately after the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) was enacted in 1975, school systems were pressed to find certified special education teachers. In 2002 approximately 12.3% of all special educators lacked certification while 13.6 million students were certified as having a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). Compounding this challenge, specifically in rural areas, was the 2001 enactment of the No Child Left behind Act (NCLB) that required all special education teachers must be highly qualified (Federal Education Budget Project, 2013).

The federal government did not appear to recognize rural school systems have been and were using alternative pathways for obtaining teacher certification; however, filling special education teacher positions remained a challenge (Ludlow, 1998; Rosenkoetter, Irwin, & Saceda, 2004).

The majority of colleges and universities were not located in rural areas making it difficult to adequately prepare teachers to serve in those areas (Westling & Whitten, 1996). Another challenge for rural areas was the lack of local funding and resources. Adding to this dilemma was the decline in state and federal budgets (Jimerson, 2005). One huge advantage of the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort Program was having local staff available that taught and mentored those paraprofessionals as they made the journey to certified teacher (J. Enloe, personal communication February 8, 2012; City of Sevierville, 2005).

### *Sevier County's Financial Crisis*

In 2005 Sevier County Schools suffered a major loss in funding. Money that had historically been provided to the Sevier County School System from local tax structures were suddenly taken away. In August of 2005 the State of Tennessee's Building Commission granted approval of two development districts under the proposed 2004 Central Business Improvement District Project (CBID) to the City of Sevierville. This agreement gave the City of Sevierville the right to retain the majority of generated sales tax in its district. The money was designated to pay for new public facilities, road construction, and improvement of local infrastructures. The two zones were located in Sevierville and Pigeon Forge with the major tract being in the City of Sevierville. The primary track in Sevierville included the Highway 66 corridor, the main entrance into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Dollywood (The City of Sevierville, 2005). Even though the CBID Project was hailed as being a huge victory for the City of Sevierville, county schools suffered a huge loss in revenue. In essence, during the next 20 to 25 years that newly formed tracts are in existence, Sevier County Schools will not receive the generated sales tax. This fact, coupled with the current funding formula, stating Sevier County Schools did not pay its fair share in property taxes and deserved no new revenues, resulted in a

huge loss of resources for the school system. Another little known fact was the assumption that given all the tourism generated in the area, Sevier County Schools was a wealthy county. Not so. Approximately 70% of students qualified for free and reduced lunches. An example being that Pi Beta Phi Elementary School in Gatlinburg (also part of Sevier County Schools) with the reputation of being in the affluent section of Sevier County was a Title I school (J. Enloe, personal communication, June 12, 2012).

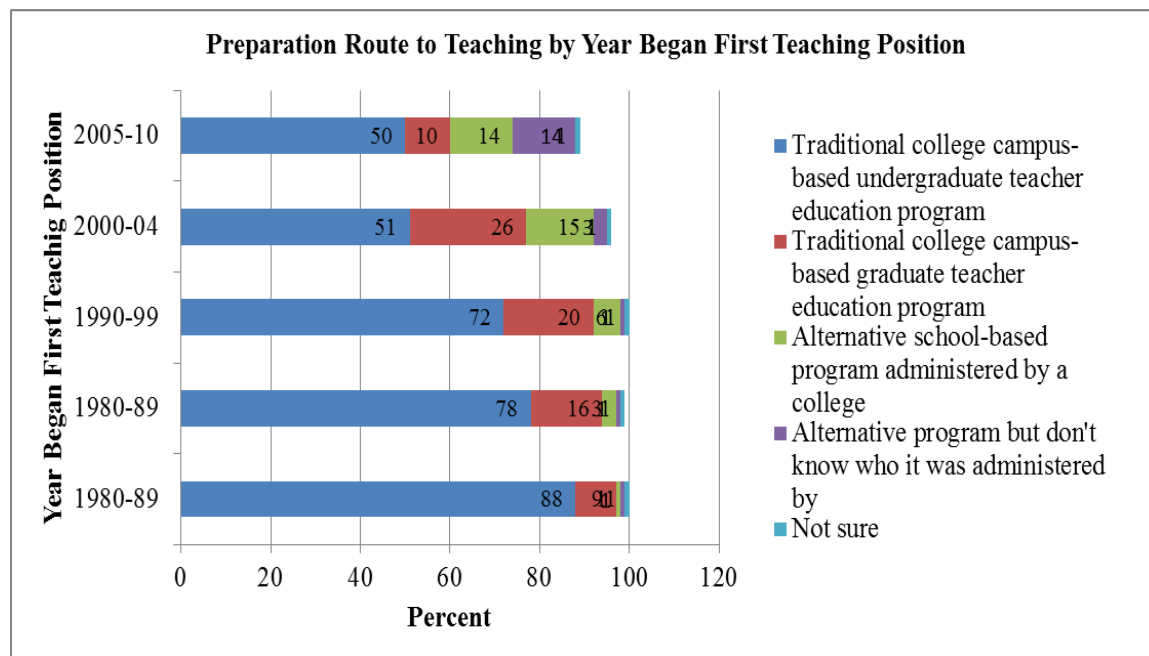
### *Profile of Teachers in the United States*

According to 2007-2008 statistics from the U.S. Department's National Center for Education of the nation's 49.4 million students attending PK-12 public schools are being taught by 3.2 million public school teachers (NCES) (taken from the Profile of Teachers in the United States, Feistritzer, 2011). The 2011 National Center for Education Information illustrated the majority of teachers that began their teaching career prior to 1980 (see Table 1); 97% did so through the traditional college route, 88% started as undergraduates, and 9% started in a graduate program all of which were provided at the campus site (Feistritzer, 2011).



Table 1

*Preparation Route to Teaching by Year Began First Teaching Position*



(Used with permission, as shown in Appendix A)

In the past 5 years a stream of newly hired teachers, approximately 40%, came from the alternative program pathway. Between 2005 and 2010 those entering from traditional university campus based undergraduate programs declined to 50%, while those entering the teaching field from graduate programs declined by 10% (Feistritzer, 2011).

*Summary*

The review of literature in Chapter 2 provided the reader information related to the history of paraprofessionals, national perspective on teacher shortage, Tennessee's attempt to address teacher shortage, culture and changing demographics in East Tennessee, alternative routes to certification, and the profile of teachers in the United States.

The history of paraprofessionals gave an overview of how their roles and responsibilities have changed over the past decades. The paradigm shift from performing menial household

chores for the teachers they served to the requirements of being trained in pedagogical skills and meeting highly qualified status was quite extraordinary.

The section discussing the national perspective on teacher shortages suggested the urgency and demands placed on federal, state, and local educational agencies to be creative in their quest to meet teacher shortages.

Even though Tennessee had made concerted efforts in addressing teacher shortage, the fact remained that more must be done to alleviate this continued challenge. The ESTU-Sevier County Cohort has shown to be a promising response in meeting teacher shortages in rural areas of East Tennessee.

The importance of explaining local culture and the demographics of rural East Tennessee was a crucial piece of this research. Understanding the challenge local schools faced in serving students with diverse backgrounds were often overlooked and underemphasized. The role paraprofessionals served as connectors to these transient families was a huge benefit in transitioning students to a new school environment.

The research relating to alternative routes to obtain teacher certification was at the heart of this study. While the argument of alternative routes vs. traditional pathways continued, the data relating to the increase of AR programs was evident and profiles continued to show increased participation in addressing teacher shortages.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Introduction*

During my tenure as a supervisor of special education in a very rural, isolated section of East Tennessee, I came to realize the importance of paraprofessionals in providing services to students with disabilities. I also witnessed the many responsibilities, roles, and demands placed on these individuals with little to no training. I observed firsthand the potential of these individuals and believed if given the opportunity they would make great teachers.

As the review of literature has shown, the increased demands placed on paraprofessionals proliferated over the past 2 decades. The trend for many states was to place more students with disabilities into general education environments in what was termed inclusion. The justification for these placements was to meet individual student's needs by providing modifications, accommodations, and supplementary aids and services. In order to meet these requirements paraprofessionals were assigned to general education classrooms. Research indicated many of these paraprofessionals were ill prepared and not properly trained. Even though the focus of *No Child left Behind (NCLB)* and the *Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)* was to ensure paraprofessionals were highly qualified, simply passing a test to meet these requirements did not always meet the needs of these students with disabilities (Giangreco & Broer, 2007).

This qualitative study was used to investigate the experiences of 12 paraprofessionals who completed the first ETSU-Sevier County Cohort. The study was used to focus on the experiences of each cohort participant as he or she made the journey from paraprofessional to certified teacher. The majority of paraprofessionals working in rural areas were community members who have a history of being involved in school activities. Even though they worked for

little pay and in many systems did not receive appropriate training, their dedication and commitment was evident (Tyler, 2003).

The six participants were selected from a pool of 16 members who completed the first cohort beginning in 2000 and graduating in 2004. These cohort participants were selected by using a convenience sampling method as described by Weiss (1994).

Sandy Enloe, Special Education Supervisor for Sevier County Tennessee, served as the immediate supervisor of most of the cohort students, taught many of the classes for the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort, and assisted me in determining the final selection. From these 12 cohort participants I wanted the answer to this question: What is it like being a paraprofessional, going back to school, and now working as a teacher?

Results from this research could provide information to local city and county governments, local school systems, state departments of education, and institutes of higher education in their continuing challenge of meeting teacher shortages in rural areas of East Tennessee and across the nation. The review of literature provided these educational entities a plethora of resources in their quest to meet these shortages.

### *Method*

I chose qualitative phenomenological research for gathering my data. Phenomenology, when used as an educational research method, depicts and describes basic lived experiences (Weininger, 1999). Phenomenology is a research method that attempts to describe the everyday experience a person encounters. Phenomenology goes even further in its attempt to not only describe these experiences but to get at the essence of their meaning. As Van Manen (1990a) describes phenomenology; it is both the “description of the lived-through quality of lived experience and the description of meaning of the expressions of lived experience” (p. 24).

Phenomenology looks for hidden meaning and frowns on any tendency to predetermine outcomes or fixed procedures or concepts that would invalidate the research process (Van-Manen, 1990a).

The aim of this study was not to assume anything but to capture and interpret experiences and perspectives of those cohort participants as they journeyed from paraprofessional to certified teacher (Campbell-Evans, 1992; Creswell, 1997; Van Manen, 1990b).

For gaining insight into a specific phenomenon and getting at the essential essence of the experience, the qualitative design was often the researcher's choice (Mertler & Charles, 2008). Phenomenology allows the researcher to uncover, to find the essence of, discovering the significance of everyday reality. The intent of phenomenology is to find the true experience (Van Manen, 1990a). This method allowed me to describe the lived phenomenal experiences these paraprofessional cohort members experienced as they made their way to certified teachers.

By using the qualitative, phenomenological method, I gathered answers from in-depth interviews describing detailed themes for coding. From these interviews I gave meaning to their experiences by encouraging each cohort member to describe his or her experience in full detail.

For example, one interview question was: Having previously worked as a paraprofessional, was your experience helpful in completing the required coursework at East Tennessee State University? In what way? Explain. This type of opened-ended questioning allowed me to acquire a full description of their personal experiences. The interview questions focused more on the experiences of these cohort members giving specific, descriptive detail to those events (Van Manen, 1990b).

Phenomenology allowed me to interpret not only individual experiences, but more importantly, information from collective interviews helped me understand patterns and

distinctions within the group (Miles & Huberman, 1993). Multiple sources of collecting information helped corroborate and clearly define the research findings (Ritchie & Lewis, 2008). By using multiple sources of collecting data, the reliability and validity of the study increased. Cross checking data from multiple sources helped create a multidimensional profile of the study (Becker et al., 2005). By looking at the lived experiences of each cohort member phenomenology led me in answering the question, what was your experience as you went from paraprofessional to certified teacher (Polkinghorne, 1989)? The goal of this study was to understand those experiences, to tell each individual's understanding and perspective, and to get at the essence of the journey as the individuals transitioned through the cohort (Campbell-Evans, 1992).

Many phenomenologist researchers will argue that at some point subjectivity is implicated in most research Giorgi (1994) stated, "Nothing can be accomplished without subjectivity, so its elimination is not the solution. Rather how the subject is presented is what matters and objectivity itself is an achievement of subjectivity" (p. 205).

A study by Campbell (2000) on phenomenological research methods convinced me of the direction for my study. What the author termed "the phenomenon of personal transformation" (p. 1) guided me in examining not only the experiences of cohort member but the experiences of other group members such as special education supervisors and state department personnel. As the Campbell (2000) study explained, phenomenological research should be examined in a broader framework, in essence as a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1970). This paradigm shift is taking place not only in research methodology but is part of a much larger global movement. As East Tennessee and the world was experiencing this cultural, religious, political, and educational transformation, the challenge of collecting and analyzing personal transformations would take on

a new meaning. Researching this phenomenon of personal, global, transformation would be crucial for all stakeholders in addressing a multitude of educational and social challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Campbell, 2000).

### *Participants*

#### *Selecting Participants for the Study*

In selecting the cohort members for this study a determining factor was choosing individuals who understood local culture. All schools have a local culture and a history. Being connected to that culture means that person is more likely to remain there even when times get rough. Not only do they understand the culture, they will be more likely to provide experiences from that culture thus providing the researcher a richer more descriptive interpretation of their challenges as they navigated the cohort maze (Colley, 2002).

There were three basic methods in selecting participants when using interviewing as the means for collecting data (Weiss, 1994). The first method was probability sample. This involved choosing participants at random from the total population being researched in turn providing a higher mathematical representation of that group. The second technique involved sampling a group in the attempt to maximize range. The intent of this design was to define as many different experiences as possible in a given population in order to avoid duplication of the same story (Weiss, 1994). The third and final strategy for selecting participants and the one I chose for this study was convenience sampling. The idea behind this strategy was based on the challenges researchers face when random samples may be too small to choose from or the difficulty in finding examples of differing experiences within a population (Weiss, 1994). When selecting the convenience sampling method, researchers seek out who is the best, most appropriate person available who was knowledgeable about the group being studied. Sandy Enloe, Special

Education Supervisor for Sevier County Schools, is a person who is very knowledgeable about each member in the ETSU Cohort. She taught many of the cohort classes and provided the list of participants who were chosen for the study. Given the dynamics and make up of this group, convenience sampling was the most effective means of collecting data for this research (Armakolas, 2001).

The participants for this study consisted of 12 teachers who were former paraprofessionals and members of the first cohort group to complete their degrees from ETSU. Participants were selected and agreed to participate. Participants were invited to participate and a complete explanation of the study was provided with specific emphasis on no stress involved in the interview process; they could opt to drop out of the study at any time (Bickman & Rog, 1998).

The 2000 ETSU-Sevier County Cohort started with 16 members. Currently 13 are teaching in special education, one cohort member is deceased, and two cohort members moved so that the other members do not know of their status. The 12 teacher cohort members were selected using a typical case sampling (Patton, 1990). Selecting participants was accomplished by using a purposive sampling method with the assistance of special education supervisors in the member's respective school system. This method increased the possibilities of collecting data from a variety of sources and increased the probability that a larger spectrum of realities will be uncovered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Presently, the majority of these teacher participants work in the Sevier County School System in East Tennessee.

Prior to contacting these selected participants, a letter was sent to the Director of Schools in the school system they serve, describing the purpose of the study, a list of participants, and



permission to conduct interviews in the schools in which they work. A copy of this letter can be found in Appendix B.

### *Procedure for Data Collection*

Personal in-depth interviews were the primary method of collecting data. Participants were assured of confidentiality within the interview process. Protecting the confidentiality of each individual interviewee was important in three areas. First, discussing these experiences could conjure up sensitive issues. Second, recording the interview had the potential for information to be heard by someone who could recognize that person. Third, disclosure of sensitive information had unknown potential and was explored prior to the interviews (Seidman, 1998).

The interview questions were generated by the researcher using a general interview guide process. All interviews were recorded. A written record of each interview was conducted. Questions and topics of discussion were guided and adjusted accordingly based on the interview. Follow-up interviews were conducted as deemed appropriate (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

To ensure information was collected addressing the cultural aspect of each participant's journey, interviews were focused on obtaining what was described as ethnographically-linked textures; providing thick rich descriptions from each participant personal experience (Gephart, 1999). Validity and reliability of the research data were important. Responses from the interviewees were checked and rechecked to determine if the same attributes applied within the group, which provided internal validity.

### *Pilot Testing*

Qualitative research can be a very challenging endeavor specifically if the researcher has little experience or knowledge in conducting research (Turner, 2010). For that reason this

researcher conducted a pilot test to ensure interviews and data were collected in a professional manner. A pilot test was an invaluable practice in determining possible weaknesses in the research design, allowing needed changes prior to implementing the study (Kvale, 2007). Pilot tests should be conducted by a person who had similar experience in the subject matter of the study and who may need to redefine questions or rearrange the format and design of the interview (Kvale, 2007).

The pilot test was conducted with three cohort members from the second group that completed the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort starting in 2005 and ending in 2009. Sandy Enloe, Special Education Supervisor in Sevier County, assisted me in choosing those participants and scheduling a time for the interviews. After this I called each participant by phone to confirm the interview date and with a brief overview of why I wanted him or her to participate in the pilot test. Issues of confidentiality were explained. Prior to the actual pilot test, I met with each of the three cohort members individually and provided an overview and purpose of the study.

#### *Preparing for the Pilot Test Interview*

One of the most important aspects of conducting research with fidelity is in the preparation stage (McNamara, 2009). Conducting pilot interviews before the actual study begins helps the researcher test the questions and improve interviewing skills (Creswell, 1998; Weiss, 1994).

Prior to the pilot interviews McNamara (2009) suggested eight principles in preparing for the interviews: (1) Select an environment free of distractions, (2) Ensure all participants understand confidentiality issues, (3) Explain the purpose of the interview, (4) Review and explain the interview format, (5) Explain the approximate time allotted for the interview, (6) Provide them information on how to get in touch with the researcher, (7) Prior to the actual

interview ask them if they have any questions before getting started, and (8) Be prepared on how you will record their answers and have a backup plan (McNamara, 2009). The researcher sent a thank you note to all cohort members who agreed to be a part of this study with a comment stating I would be happy to send them a copy of the final dissertation should they wish for one.

After these interviews were completed the researcher reviewed the pilot test audio recordings and personal notes to reflect possible changes in the interview format. These changes could be reconsidering specific questions, location, and environment of the interview. This also provided the researcher experience in coding the interviews. The researcher was cognizant not to let the responses from these interviews in any way interfere or bias the interviews with cohort participants and with the focus group activity.

This study incorporated three types of interviews formats; the first was the pilot test with three members of the second cohort. The second was with the six chosen cohort participants for individual in-depth interviews. After this was concluded, a focus group setting inviting all cohort members who completed the first ETSU-Sevier County Cohort was scheduled.

### *Interviewing*

As soon as the research plan had been completed and cohort members selected (both for the pilot interviews, actual cohort participants, and focus groups) the next step was to schedule interviews, first for the pilot test. In-depth interviews provided the researcher invaluable information. As Weiss (1994) stated “interviewing gives us a window on the past. We can also, by interviewing, learn about settings that would otherwise be closed to us: foreign societies, exclusive organizations, and the private lives of families and couples” (p. 1).

After a date, location, and time was selected by those who agreed to participate in the pilot test, the pilot interviews began. These interviews did not last over 90 minutes and the

researcher followed the eight principles previously suggested by McNamara (2009). The interview questions for cohort participants listed below were used.

Question 1: Having previously worked as a paraprofessional, did that experience help you to work more effectively with the paraprofessional(s) in your school? In what way? Explain.

Question 2: What challenges did you face from your cohort experience?

Question 3: What funds of knowledge did you tap into to succeed in college?

Question 4: What are some of the underlying themes you experienced as you made your way from paraprofessional to certified teacher?

Question 5: Having previously worked as a paraprofessional, has that experience been an advantage in preparing you to become a better special education teacher? In what way? Explain.

Question 6: Having previously worked as a paraprofessional, was your experience helpful in completing the required course work at ETSU? In what way? Explain.

Interview questions for both special education supervisors were as follows:

Question 1: Having previously supervised these paraprofessionals who completed the first ETSU Cohort and are now certified teachers working in your school system, what changes have you noted as they transitioned from paraprofessional to certified teacher? Explain.

Question 2: Would you recommend this type of grant (ETSU-Sevier County Cohort) to other local educational agencies or state departments of education? Why or why not?

Question 3: How have these paraprofessionals (now certified teachers) been a good example for paraprofessionals in Sevier County?

- Question 4: What is the percentage of paraprofessionals who completed the ETSU Cohort and are currently teaching in special education in your school system?
- Question 5: According to the latest research 33% of new teachers leave within 3 years and 46% exit in 5 years (Ponick, Keating, Pontiff, & Wilcox, 2003). How many of those who completed the first ETSU Cohort starting in 2000 are currently teaching? To what specific factors do you attribute their lack of attrition from the profession?
- Question 6: In your opinion, did the fact these first cohort participants had experience as paraprofessionals prior to becoming certified teachers have an impact on their level of expertise once they entered the profession as teachers? Why would that be true?
- Question 7: What is your opinion of the ETSU Cohort as an alternative pathway compared to a traditional pathway in obtaining teacher certification?
- Question 8: What are the primary benefits to these former paraprofessionals gained as a result of their cohort experience compared to teachers entering the profession through traditional programs?
- Question 9: Do you believe having worked as a paraprofessional prior to becoming a certified teacher was an advantage for those cohort participants? Explain.
- Question 10: Do you believe those who worked as a paraprofessional prior to becoming a certified teacher was an advantage in completing the required coursework at ETSU? Explain.

These questions are a sampling of the type of questions that were open ended and were adequate in forming a narrative in answering each research question. A major advantage of in-depth interviews was the specific detailed information they provide (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

All interviews were recorded. The advantage of recording each interview was paramount over the challenge note taking required and allowing the interviewer the opportunity to read the body language of the person being interviewed (Weiss, 1994). Prior to taping consent forms were signed and confidentiality reassured. Eliciting small talk prior to actual interviewing helped make the person more relaxed and open to answering questions once the official process began (Creswell, 1998; Weiss, 1994). The researcher must be aware not to interrupt or prod the respondent unless he or she begins to strike up a conversation that is irrelevant to the topic (Weiss, 1994).

In the spirit of confidentiality the researcher must be cognizant not to disclose any information that may be traced back to an individual. Permission from a respondent must be obtained before any quotes are included in the final study. Examples of using a person's age or sex may elicit readers to recognize that person (Boyce & Neale, 2006).

### *Focus Groups*

To answer ancillary questions from a larger participant pool, a focus group was established. Focus groups, for gathering research data in a qualitative study, are quite common. The average size of a focus group is approximately 8 to 10 participants. The activity should be performed at a neutral site with an environment large enough and conducive for the event. An oval table is preferred; however, seating can be arranged in a circle allowing all participants to see and interact with each other (Tuff & Johnson, n.d.). Using focus groups in qualitative research became popular in the 1980s. My intent was to collect attitudes and thought processes

by way of open-ended questions. Prior to scheduling a focus group activity, the researcher first determined if this activity would benefit the research study (Qual & Qual, 2003).

In-depth interviews with six cohort participants were coded and analyzed for specific themes. The determination was made to include a focus group activity based on factors such as: (a) all cohort members of the first graduating class had an opportunity to answer the same questions as was given to the six cohort participants, thus increasing the possibility of getting at the essence of their experiences and reaching group consensus of those experiences, (b) the activity helped solidify the researcher's objective, (c) increased triangulation, and (d) information gathered from the activity increased accuracy of themes, identified perceptions, and gained further clarification and credibility of the study (Creswell, 1994, 1997).

The focus group activity involved hosting three cohort members who had been interviewed and an additional six cohort members who had not been interviewed in a focus group environment with the researcher facilitating the group. Two of the original 16-member cohort were unavailable, another chose not to participate, and the final one was deceased. Prior to this meeting, interview transcripts from the cohort participants were coded and analyzed for themes. The focus group activity was conducted as follows:

1. Introductions involved introducing the researcher and facilitator of the group. The purpose of focus groups and the purpose of our meeting were explained. The research assistant was introduced and her role of taking notes during the activity explained. After this the facilitator asked each person to introduce himself or herself, tell about himself or herself, and where he or she is working. Refreshments were provided and the importance of everyone being comfortable in the setting discussed. If for any reason anyone wished to leave, that option was available.

2. Ground rules were discussed and agreed on. The following rules were open for discussion:
  - a. One person respond at a time
  - b. Be respectful of others (allow everyone the opportunity to express themselves)
  - c. Talk clearly so recorder will pick up
  - d. No side conversations
  - e. Be courageous in presenting your convictions
  - f. Stay on topic (Qual & Qual, 2003).
3. An overview of the event was explained. The Institution Review Board (IRB) narrative was my source of review. First, reasons of why I chose this research subject were explained. The group was asked to answer six open-ended questions with one question answered before moving on to the next question. Next, explanations of confidentiality and the fact no names would be used in identifying any person were reviewed. Questions or further clarification of my intent were welcomed and stressed to insure that every participant was comfortable in being part of the activity.
4. At this point of the IRB permission forms to interview and participate in the focus group were disseminated. The content of these forms was explained and questions addressed. Transcripts of the cohort interviews were distributed to the three interviewed who were also focus group participants along with directions to review questions and answers and that if they wished to add, delete, or change answers in any way, they should scan and send the changes to me within a week. This increased triangulation of the study by providing the three focus group participants who had also been interviewed an opportunity to make sure that what they said during the interview was what they intended to say (Guion, Diehl, &



McDonald, 2011). The transcripts also reminded those particular participants about the answers they had provided during the previous interview.

5. Name tags were provided to all participants. Explanations about the name tags and how they would be used for the activity was discussed. First, the cohort interviewee name tags would be given to those three participants who were also interviewed. This purpose being that as each question was given to the group the new (noninterviewed) focus group members were given the first opportunity to respond. After the facilitator was comfortable with answers from the noninterviewed focus group members and the interviewed participants had listened to those responses the interviewed participants were given the opportunity to answer. Instructions also included that as each member responded they first stated which group they represent, gave their name, and then responded. The purpose in this detail of identifying which member responds was helpful when coding for themes and increasing triangulation (Green, 2006).
6. At the end of the focus group activity, the researcher thanked the group members for their participation and provided the participants with the email address and cell phone number of the facilitator if for any reason they wished to contact him.

#### *Validity, Reliability, and Triangulation*

“Validity: the best available approximation to the truth of a given proposition, inference, or conclusion” (Trochim, 2006, p. 1). In designing a qualitative study, a definite purpose must be established with clear connections between the research question and proposed method ensuring the data will be both valid and reliable. Validity answered the question did you measure what you intended to measure (Ritchie & Lewis, 2008). Validity in qualitative research can be challenge when the researcher is attempting to make a point or change a policy especially when

as Golafshani (2003) surmises, the perceptions of the researcher is what defines validity. He goes on to indicate there is no validity without reliability and that it is vital to use a variety of data collection strategies in establishing the credibility of the research (Golafshani, 2003).

In their plea for a change in research terminology specific to rigor being used in qualitative research authors (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002) argued that researchers should implement strategies and check points during their research journey (not after) enabling them to further maintain validity and reliability. This research was accomplished in this manner. First, in-depth interviews were collected and coded, after which these transcripts were given back to cohort participants for reflection and as needed, changed. Next the focus group activity provided themes and compared them from those garnered from the cohort participant in-depth interviews. After this, questions and responses from the special education supervisors were reviewed for themes. These data and comparisons came from five sources ensuring themes from the experiences and reflections of this 2000-2004 cohort group were captured (Morse et al., 2002).

Unlike Einstein's definition of insanity, "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results" (Street Directory, Einstein - Definition of Insanity, para. 1); reliability in research refers to the ability to repeat the same research and receive the same results. Ritchie and Lewis (2003) suggested that the researcher provide detailed information of the methodology and specifics on "internal elements, dimensions, factors, sectors, and so on" (p. 271). Validity and reliability go hand in hand and have a strong relationship in research practice. Reliability is obtained with consistency over time; however, it is only valid if you are measuring what you intend to measure. As Mertler and Charles (2008) stated in their book *Introduction to Educational Research*, "when establishing the validity and reliability of your research data,

always remember the following adage: a valid test is always reliable, but a reliable test is not necessarily valid” (p. 151).

Triangulation is necessary in qualitative research involving multiple sources of data collection to ensure that what is reported is comprehensive and presented in a manner that readers can understand. Using multiple sources of data is a way of facilitating deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Triangulation is not using data from a single source but is achieved through collecting data from various sources (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Triangulation occurred in this study, first by validating in-depth interviews with cohort participants as a way of assuring that what was said during the interviews was what the transcripts included. Next, the focus group activity was a triangulation method of collecting themes and comparing answers of all participating cohort group members. This method of transferability proved to provide clear, rich, and descriptive data (Patton, 1990).

Validity, reliability, and triangulation of the research data were important. To determine internal validity, responses from those interviewed were checked and rechecked to determine if the same attributes and themes applied within the group (Struwig & Stead, 2004).

In-depth interviews of two special education supervisors provided the research another point of data that reinforced the findings and increased triangulation when themes from these interviews were compared to those from cohort participants and from the focus group activity.

To achieve successful triangulation, I first gathered information from my interviews of the six cohort participants first selected for the study. Second, after printing the individual responses (hard copy), I scheduled another meeting with each individual participant to discuss the transcripts. I explained to each participant my purpose in this meeting was to (1) review each

question and response and (2) as each question is discussed, I asked if they are comfortable with that response, or is there anything they want to add, delete, or change. I also interviewed the special education supervisors from Sevier and Campbell County School systems from which chosen participants were selected. Information gleaned from these interviews provided the researcher with invaluable information, information that strengthened the triangulation process in getting to, as Patton (1990) describes, thick, rich data. This process of transferability allowed the researcher to cross check findings in other common environments participants in the study reside (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Focus-group interviewing was another technique for increasing triangulation. This method of data collection increased the researcher chance in identifying perceptions, attitudes, and experiences within the group (Creswell, 1994). This process involved (1) meeting all cohort members in a focus group environment with the researcher facilitating the group; (2) prior to this meeting interview transcripts were coded and analyzed for themes; (3) common themes that emerged from the group were discussed; (4) as each theme was discussed and debated, consensus was determined; and (5) as consensus is confirmed regarding each theme, this information was coded and recorded (Chopra, Lucero, DeBalderas, & Carroll, 2009).

### *Trustworthiness*

Without establishing trustworthiness, this study would not be credible. As a researcher, I must act as Johnson (1997). Through careful and thorough analysis, the researcher (detective), gained an understanding of possible causes and effects and does so by discarding explanations or assumptions that could have run counter to the final outcome. In the opinion of Johnson (1997) in qualitative research, there are three types of validity: (1) descriptive: the accurateness of events as described by the researcher; (2) interpretive: ensuring the experiences, opinions,

feelings, and inflections of participants are accurately reported by the researcher; and (3) theoretical: based on what the data presents, is there a positive connection that can be justly explained and defended. For this research, I used multiple methods in establishing credibility. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) surmised, prolonged engagement; being familiar with the educational and cultural environment in which these participants and professionals live and work proved invaluable in my obtaining trust and comfort within that climate. The establishment of trust as a fellow professional educator gained me precedence and respect as a researcher.

A review of the data illustrated themes and patterns from interview dialogues. These themes were crucial for interpreting, understanding, coding, and categorizing the phenomenon (Suter, 2006). The integrity of the responses was determined by using triangulation. Triangulation ensured the data were valid and reliable. Answers provided from the interviews were triangulated to test the integrity of the data (Fink, 2003). Triangulation was obtained by gathering data from multiple sources. As these sources were screened for accuracy, they present a picture of all the gathered data across all venues (Marshall & Rossman, 1995).

In establishing credibility of this research, I used what Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as a peer debriefer, someone with an unbiased point of view. My choice was John Enloe, Assistant Director of Sevier County Schools in East Tennessee. He acted not only as my peer debriefer but as my peer reviewer for the complete dissertation. John Enloe reviewed each phase of the research, examined proposed designs for the study, and assisted in the format for how the data were collected and analyzed.

Finally, I explained the type of research and the methods proposed and how I conducted the research. Selection of participants for this study was explained along with why phenomenology was my choice of research design.

### *Summary*

Chapter 3 provided the reader information of why phenomenology was the methodology chosen for conducting this research along with selection of participants, procedures for collecting data, use of pilot test, and interview questions. Obtaining validity and reliability was explained along with why triangulation is a necessary component in conducting qualitative research. The importance of establishing trustworthiness to ensure the study was credible was provided.

To further establish credibility of the research, I chose what Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe as a peer debriefer, someone with an unbiased point of view. My choice of selection was John Enloe, Assistant Director, Sevier County Schools in East Tennessee. Enloe acted not only as my peer debriefer but as my peer reviewer for the complete dissertation. Enloe reviewed each phase of the research, examined proposed designs for the study, and assisted in the format for how the data were collected and analyzed.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

In 2000 the Tennessee Department of Education Division of Special Education, ETSU, and Sevier County combined resources to address the shortage of certified special education teachers in East Tennessee. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of six cohort members who completed the first East Tennessee State University (ETSU)-Sevier County Cohort. The focus of the study was to examine the experiences of these cohort members while going to college, continuing to work as paraprofessionals, completing the cohort, and gaining the status of certified special education teachers. Critical also to the study was the background experiences and family life of each member as pertains to the central question of the research. The purpose of the study was to answer the question: What was your experience as you went from paraprofessional to certified teacher? An underlying question that emerged during the study was how their experiences as a paraprofessional affected interaction with paraprofessionals who were assigned to work under their supervision. Getting the answer involved diving deep into their personal lives in sharing attitudes, perceptions, patterns, and themes that would bring validity and reliability from the data collected (Kvale, 1996).

Prior to gathering data a research design was selected as described in Chapter 3. The purpose of the design was to develop a strategy and a plan in order to get the answer to the research questions (Kerlinger, 1986). A design provided a means in regard to how the study would be conducted and where, when, and how the data would be collected. The purpose of the study was to obtain the most valid and reliable answers to the research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 1993).

Choosing a qualitative method based on a phenomenological design afforded the researcher a way of painting a picture of these experiences based on in-depth interviews with six cohort members and from a focus group activity. As Merriman (2002) concluded, “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3). He went on to say key components of qualitative research are maintaining an in-depth focus on a few individuals or settings and to recognize the researcher’s role as an instrument of the study.

The organization of the analysis of data chapter provided an overview of the researcher’s role as interviewer and facilitator, pilot interviews and focus group activity, participants for the study, demographic information, data collection procedures, coding procedures, data analysis and presentations, and a summary of the results.

#### *Interviewer*

Scheduling and completing in-depth interviews were not taken lightly by this researcher. The following protocol was followed in ensuring interviews were of high quality: (a) With the assistance of Sandy Enloe, participants for the study were selected and dates and times scheduled for each interview; (b) The researcher was focused and motivated for each interview with the intent to communicate this commitment to each participant being interviewed; (c) The researcher was prepared to answer and clarify any and all questions responding candidly and informatively; and (d) The researcher and interviewer was aware that each interview was and should be different. By allowing the interviewee an open path to further elaborate ensuring an environment within which he or she was comfortable (Trochim, 2006).



## *Pilot Interviews*

### *Purpose of the Pilot Interviews*

Three pilot interviews were conducted with members of the second ETSU-Sevier County Cohort who graduated in 2009. The purpose of those interviews was to provide the researcher with practice and experience in preparation for in-depth interviews with the first cohort participants, the subjects of this study. The pilot experience assisted the researcher in preparing for and completing the focus group exercise. Pilot interview questions were reviewed before and after the interviews by using Pole and Lampard's (2002) suggestion for obtaining effective data from in-depth interviews. The pilot interview was used to establish the following: were questions clear and specific; did they follow a logical sequence; did they allow the interviewee opportunities to expand on answers; were any questions uncomfortable from a cultural point of view; did the format allow the researcher opportunities to clarify questions or responses; were all areas covered, were all questions answered; did the use of a recording device interfere with the interview; and was the time allotted adequate (Pole & Lampard, 2002)?

### *Competent Communication for Conducting Interviews*

Becoming a competent communicator is fundamental for conducting interviews. Communication that is carried out by face-to-face dialogue has the highest probability for gathering rich data (Barry & Grant, 2000). Face-to-face dialogue provides the advantage of allowing the interviewer to observe discreet cues from the interviewee to gather information.

To ensure I was being understood by the cohort participant, I practiced sending skills, the art of making oneself understood. There are five methods of ensuring communication using this method: (1) Use language that is direct and appropriate. I was careful not to use special education acronyms or other jargon that could cause confusion. (2) When giving out the

interview question(s) I was cognizant to make sure my voice tone was precise ensuring the interviewee clearly understood each question. (3) I reduced noise level distractions by working with the school and cohort participant in finding rooms that were quiet and free of distractions. (4) I gathered data from multiple methods. However, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. A second visit was made to all six cohort participants to have them review the transcripts and determine if their original answers were accurate or if they required any adjustments. No adjustments were required (Hoy & Miskel, 2008).

Another important step for being a competent communicator for conducting interviews is to listen. Listening is often a learned behavior as the researcher seeks to understand exactly what the other person seeks to communicate. Morse and Ivey (1996) offer the following suggestions in becoming an effective listener: (a) Be attentive, use body language such as eye contact, leaning forward, keeping an open posture, maintaining a pleasant attitude to the point the person is confident and comfortable you are interested in what the person has to say. (b) Question for clarification using carefully crafted questions, but do not hesitate to clarify any answers given. Be alert to body language that is unclear regarding your question. (c) Encourage dialogue that reflects to the interviewee you are interested in what he or she has to say when appropriate. Provide cues or prompts such as nodding your head or comments such as um-hum lets the interviewee know you are alert to everything said. (d) Another important component of an effective interviewer is to paraphrase what the person has said as a way of ensuring communication is clear and the essence of the message was understood by both parties. (e) All these devices help the interviewer and interviewee as they communicate then reflect upon what was said along with what was not stated but nevertheless communicated (Morse & Ivey, 1996).

### *Cohort Participants*

The participants or interviewees for this study were selected because they were in the very first cohort group of the East Tennessee State University-Sevier County Schools partnership formed to address a shortage of certified special education teachers. East Tennessee State University serves to educate and improve the quality of lives of its students and its community. In the University's mission and vision, the following statement best epitomizes how and why this partnership was formed:

... to enrich the cultural and intellectual environment, advance economic development, and increase the level of educational attainment of our community and region. Innovation is advanced through entrepreneurial initiatives, interdisciplinary collaboration, and community and international partnerships. (East Tennessee State University Mission, Vision, Values, n.d., para 3)

Sevier County had a shortage of certified special education teachers and ETSU responded in a manner that reflects its mission. "ETSU pursues its mission through a student-centered community of learning reflecting high standards and promoting a balance of liberal arts and professional preparation, continuous improvement, and based on core values" (East Tennessee State University Mission, Vision, Values, n.d., para. 1).

### *Cohort Interviews and Focus Group*

The six interviewed cohort members' names were changed to protect their right to privacy and allow them to openly express their experiences. The participants appeared to openly express their personal experiences regarding how people or circumstances affected them in a positive or negative way. Their body language, spoken words, and interactions with others in the group all indicated open and honest responses to the researcher's questions. To increase validity and reliability, the focus group activity provided ancillary data in increasing and confirming themes already collected from the six interviewed cohort participants. Additionally, the focus group activity increased the number of participants in the study to 12, providing stronger

triangulation. The following responses were collected from the six interviewed cohort participants and six noninterviewee cohort focus group members.

### *Question 1*

Having previously worked as a paraprofessional, did that experience help you work more effectively with the paraprofessional(s) in your school? If so, how did your experience help you?

Three interviewed cohort participants and six additional noninterviewed cohort focus group members all responded in the affirmative. Recurring themes from the responses are shown in Table 2 and are explained as:

- Five cohort interviewees and six noninterviewed focus group members indicated through their own experience they understood the roles and responsibilities of their paraprofessionals.
- Five cohort interviewees and five noninterviewed focus group members expressed empathy with the paraprofessionals they worked with because they had walked in their shoes.
- Four cohort interviewees and three noninterviewed focus group members referred to the working relationship between the teacher and paraprofessional as teamwork.
- Three cohort interviewees and two noninterviewed focus group members indicated respect for the paraprofessional who now works for them. One participant expressed that he or she understood the need to give paraprofessionals the respect they deserve.

Table 2

*How the Experience Enriched Newly Certified Teachers*

Did that experience help you work more effectively with the paraprofessional(s) in your school?	Cohort Members Interviewed	Cohort Members Not Interviewed	Cohort Members N/A
• Understand the roles and responsibilities of the paraprofessional	5	6	1
• Have empathy with the paraprofessionals they worked with because they had walked in their shoes	5	5	2
• Understand working relationship between the teacher and paraprofessional as teamwork	4	3	5
• Have respect for the paraprofessional who now works for them	3	2	7

*Question 2*

What challenges did you face from your cohort experience? Recurring challenge themes are shown in Table 3 and explained as:

- Five cohort interviewees and five noninterviewed focus group members indicated time management was a challenge for them as they tried to manage working, going to school, and meeting family obligations.
- Three cohort interviewees and four noninterviewed focus group members stated that meeting financial obligations were a challenge. Even though their classes were paid for, purchasing gas and having money for meals were still a burden. One member indicated that the director of schools where he worked would not allow him to provide a substitute while he completed his student teaching. He was forced to resign his position to complete his required student teaching experience.
- Three cohort interviewees and three noninterviewed focus group members stated that navigating the college system was a huge challenge. An example was the university staff was

continually losing things they would send them. Additionally, members expressed the university was inflexible with them in scheduling classes.

- One cohort interviewees and two noninterviewed focus group members indicated that dealing with different personalities was a challenge. One member stated she entered the group at a late date and initially had problems fitting in with the group. Another member said, “This was a strong group with strong personalities, which was both good and bad, but in the end it was the most enjoyable thing for me.”

Table 3

*Challenges Faced from Cohort Experience*

What challenges did you face from your cohort experience?	Cohort Members Interviewed	Cohort Members Not Interviewed	Cohort Members N/A
• Time management	5	5	2
• Financial obligations	3	4	5
• Navigating the college system	3	3	6
• Dealing with different personalities	1	2	9

*Question 3*

What funds of knowledge did you tap into to succeed in college? Recurring themes from the responses are shown in Table 4 and explained as:

- Four cohort interviewees and three noninterviewed focus group members stated that self-discipline was a fund of knowledge in reaching their goal.
- Five cohort interviewees and two noninterviewed focus group members indicated that support from their teachers and instructors were the major factors in their success. One person stated that a teacher told her she worked so well with her son who had a disability that she should go back to college and get a teaching certificate.

- Five cohort interviewees and two noninterviewed focus group members stated that supporting each other within the cohort was the largest fund they relied upon in meeting the challenges of completing the coursework. One focus group member indicated that this was a very diverse, strong, opinionated group who always had each other's back.
- Two cohort interviewees and three noninterviewed focus group members stated that their personal background, work ethic, and experience were the dominant bases that helped them succeed in completing the cohort.
- Three cohort interviewees and two noninterviewed focus group members indicated family support was important in helping them succeed in college.

Table 4

*Funds of Knowledge to Succeed in College*

What funds of knowledge did you tap into to succeed in college?	Cohort Members Interviewed	Cohort Members Not Interviewed	Cohort Members N/A
• Self-discipline	4	3	5
• Support from teachers and instructors	5	2	5
• Support from cohort members	5	2	5
• Personal background, work ethic and experience	2	3	7
• Family support	3	2	7

*Question 4*

What are some of the underlying themes you experienced as you made your way from paraprofessional to certified teacher? Recurring themes from the responses are shown in Table 5 and explained as:

- Four cohort interviewees and four noninterviewed focus group members stated bonding within the group was a common theme. The theme of group bonding was prevalent throughout the interviews and was common in the dialogue. One member said, "The

cooperation and bonding with the group is probably the number one thing you get from the cohort that you don't just get by going to school.”

- Five cohort interviewees and two noninterviewed focus group members were very vocal about discovering the increased stress and frustration of being a teacher. One cohort member stated that as a teacher she did not have time anymore; she stays after school and works on weekends preparing for her class.
- Four cohort interviewees and two noninterviewed focus group members stated that depending on each other to get through the cohort was a major factor of the cohort experience. If one member of the cohort missed class, the other members ensured that notes were provided. If one member wanted to give up, the other members encouraged their cohort member to continue.
- Four cohort interviewees and two noninterviewed focus group members indicated increased responsibilities and increased paperwork were a major difference in being a paraprofessional and a teacher. Members commented on the differences of being the boss, the teacher, instead of the paraprofessional.
- Three cohort interviewees and one noninterviewed focus group member indicated that they were now seen by their peers as professional teachers and they are respected members of the educational community.



Table 5

*Underlying Themes Experienced by Paraprofessionals*

What are some of the underlying themes you experienced as you made your way from paraprofessional to professional?	Cohort Members Interviewed	Cohort Members Not Interviewed	Cohort Members N/A
• Bonding within the group	4	4	4
• Discovering the increased stress and frustration of being a teacher	5	2	5
• Depending on cohort members	4	2	6
• Increased responsibilities and increased paperwork	4	2	6
• Being seen as peers and respected members of the educational community	3	1	8

*Question 5*

Having previously worked as a paraprofessional, has that experience been an advantage in preparing you to become a better special education teacher? In what way? Explain? Six cohort interviewees and six noninterviewed focus group members responded yes to this question.

Recurring themes from the responses are shown in Table 6. These themes were:

- Six cohort interviewees and three noninterviewed focus group members stated that having access to local personnel as a resource was helpful. An example was Sandy Enloe, an ETSU instructor and local supervisor who was always there to provide guidance and assistance when needed.
- Three cohort interviewees and four noninterviewed focus group members stated the impact of personal experience as a paraprofessional prepared them to be better special education teachers. One cohort participant stated that she was very fortunate to have had a great teacher to work with and, therefore, felt better prepared to handle situations and events having had previous experiences.

- Three cohort interviewees and three noninterviewed focus group members stated that learning other duties was helpful in preparing to be a teacher. Many of their ideas came from previous experiences and from the teachers they worked under. One of the biggest lessons was to be prepared for whatever challenges one might face as a special education teacher.
- Two cohort interviewees and two noninterviewed focus group members indicated that previous bonding with parents and students had been helpful for preparation as a teacher.
- Three cohort interviewees and none of the noninterviewed focus group members stated that their experience was helpful in managing information and paperwork. An example given was that their experience helped them to complete students' individual educational programs.

Table 6

*Did Experience of Working as a Paraprofessional Have an Advantage in Preparing to Become a Certified Teacher?*

Having previously worked as a paraprofessional, has that experience been an advantage in preparing you to become a better special education teacher? In what way? Explain?	Cohort Members Interviewed	Cohort Members Not Interviewed	Cohort Members N/A
• Access to local personnel as a resource	6	3	3
• Impact of personal experience as a paraprofessional	3	4	5
• Learning other duties	3	3	6
• Previous bonding with parents and students	2	2	8
• Experience was helpful in managing information and paperwork	3	0	9

#### *Question 6*

Having previously worked as a paraprofessional, was your experience helpful in completing the required coursework at ETSU? In what way? Explain. Six cohort interviewees and six noninterviewed focus group members responded in the positive to this question.

Recurring themes from the responses are shown in Table 7 and are explained as:

- All participants agreed that having resources and previous experience that other students may not have had was helpful in completing the required coursework. One participant stated the cohort members were often the majority in the classes and tended to lead the conversations. There were differences of opinion but each member dialogued in a professional manner. One participant indicated those dialogues helped more than any other thing and was one of the best experiences of her life.
- Five cohort interviewees and three noninterviewed focus group members stated that the ETSU classroom provided an environment to discuss situations dealt with on a daily basis. One participant stated, for example the class on the different disability labels. Reading about the disability teaches certain things, but working with those students on a daily basis really makes it meaningful. Often classroom discussions were around specific students and behaviors and how to better address the various situations. Confidentiality was respected, and no one gave a student's name. These real world situations and discussions added so much more to the reading material or video content.

Table 7

*Experience as Paraprofessional Was Helpful in Completing Required Coursework.*

Having previously worked as a paraprofessional, was your experience helpful in completing the required coursework at ETSU? In what way? Explain.	Cohort Members Interviewed	Cohort Members Not Interviewed	Cohort Members N/A
• Having resources and previous experience that other students may not have had was helpful in completing the required coursework	6	6	0
• ETSU classroom provided an environment to discuss situations dealt with on a daily basis	5	3	4

As with any new adventure feelings of anxiety, angst, fear of the unknown, along with many other nightmarish emotions are common for most people. This was also true for the 16

people who were in the first ETSU-Sevier County Cohort. They were willing to enter an arena they thought they knew little about. As it turned out they knew much more than they realized.

### *Special Education Supervisor Interviews*

The following interviews were conducted with Sandy Enloe, Special Education Supervisor for Sevier County Schools, and Linda Campbell, Special Education Supervisor for Campbell County Schools. Themes were collected and recorded from both supervisors.

Question 1: Having previously supervised these paraprofessionals who completed the first ETSU Cohort and are now professional teachers working in your school system, what changes have you noted as they transitioned from paraprofessional to professional teacher? Explain.

Theme 1.1: When compared to teachers from traditional pathways, the cohort participants made a smoother transition into their role as certified teachers. This was due to the many traits they possessed largely in part to their previous experience as paraprofessional. Examples of these traits are: level of confidence, enthusiasm, dedication, positive attitude, all of which were great attributes for the school they now work in.

Theme 1.2: The support and bonding that occurred (and continues) during their journey was a constant theme mentioned from both supervisors from the in-depth interviews and from the focus group activity.

Question 2: Would you recommend this type of grant (ETSU-Sevier County Cohort) to other local educational agencies or state departments of education? Why or why not?

Both supervisors stated emphatically yes to this question and that benefits to student with disabilities are tremendous.

- Theme 2.1: The paraprofessionals, now teachers, knew going in what the job entailed from their previous experience and were prepared for the challenge. There was no question of their wanting to serve students with disabilities.
- Theme 2.2: They had no intention of simply getting a degree and then moving to a general education position as has been our experience from previous teacher hires.
- Theme 2.3: Their commitment and perseverance were unmatched to any group of students we have been involved with. For example, many members of the first cohort group found they lacked coursework that ETSU did not provide, they did not waiver but continued on in their commitment to get their teacher certification.
- Theme 2.4: Another constant theme mentioned from supervisors, interviewed cohort participants, and noninterviewed focus group members was the benefit of having local, qualified instructors some of whom were their immediate supervisors. This support allowed the cohort members to practice new learning with practical activities that were tied directly to their day-to-day paraprofessional responsibilities. These new ideas and activities were gladly accepted by the teacher he or she worked under allowing the cohort member the freedom of presenting it to the students he or she served. Both supervisors stated from their conversations with many of the cohort members, this freedom of presenting and practicing new ideas they learned from their coursework was the cornerstone of their educational career.
- Question 3: How have these paraprofessionals (now certified teachers) been a good example for paraprofessionals in Sevier County?
- Theme 3.1: The appreciation of being given an opportunity to serve the students they love.

- Theme 3.2: Their experience taught them to treat all educational service providers with enormous respect.
- Theme 3.3: Their journey is different from many other teachers and professionals, as the saying goes they did it the old fashion way, they earned it.
- Question 4: What percentage of paraprofessionals who completed the ETSU Cohort is currently teaching in special education?
- Theme 4.1: The 2000 ETSU-Sevier County Cohort started with 16 members. Currently 13 are teaching in special education, one cohort member is deceased, and two cohort members moved so that the other members do not know of their status.
- Question 5: According to the latest research 33% of new teachers leave within 3 years and 46% leave teaching within 5 years (Ponick, Keating, Pontiff, & Wilcox, 2003). How many of those who completed the first ESTU Cohort starting in 2000 are currently teaching? To what specific factors do you attribute their lack of attrition from the profession?
- Theme 5.1: With the exception of two teachers who left the community and another who is deceased, all are special education teachers.

Those teachers who completed the first cohort program and have continued to work for the past 5 years are a testament to their dedication and commitment. The fact they had direct involvement in special education allowed them to be in an environment they were already familiar with. Because of their experience as paraprofessionals they had a much easier time working with paraprofessionals assigned to them. They were well received by their teacher peer group who alongside them felt a sense of pride in their achievement.

Question 6: In your opinion, did the fact these first cohort members had experience as paraprofessionals prior to becoming certified teachers have an impact on their level of expertise once they entered the profession as teachers? Why would that be true?

Theme 6.1: Both supervisors stated yes to this question. Because of their background and experience they knew all the challenges they would be faced with prior to becoming certified teachers. This background gave them a template of what areas they saw as needing changed. The classroom provided them time to contemplate what changes they would make, what needed improving, and a renewed desire to implement their ideas.

Question 7: What is your opinion of the ETSU Cohort as an alternative pathway compared to a traditional pathway in obtaining teacher certification?

Theme 7.1: Both supervisors stated the concept and scope and sequence of the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort grant was an excellent method of recruiting special education teachers. Their experience provided them a foundation in making a very informed career choice. Many of the cohort participants had started college but had to withdraw due to financial burdens.

Theme 7.2: A major factor in their success was due to the familiarity with their instructors. This familiarity allowed them a comfortable resource both as paraprofessionals and later on as certified teachers.

Question 8: What are the primary benefits to these former paraprofessionals gained as a result of their cohort experience compared to teachers entering the profession through traditional programs?

- Theme 8.1: The design of the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort allowed the cohort participants the benefits of working directly with students and certified teachers in a school environment over a long period of time. The result of this experience was the knowledge gained in instructional strategies, behavior management, and other various roles they were placed in meeting student's needs.
- Theme 8.2: Another benefit was the cohort approach that promoted a support group throughout the educational program and continues today.
- Question 9: Do you believe having worked as a paraprofessional prior to becoming a certified teacher was an advantage for those cohort members? Explain.
- Theme 9.1: Yes, they have a deep respect and understanding of the paraprofessionals they now supervise. They have higher expectations of their paraprofessionals and are quick to acknowledge their contributions.
- Theme 9.2: They have also served as great role models and mentors for other paraprofessionals who have gone through the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort Program.
- Question 10: Do you believe those who worked as a paraprofessional prior to becoming a certified teacher was an advantage in completing the required coursework at ETSU? Explain
- Theme 10.1: Yes, they were immersed in the field of special education that brought meaning to the coursework. They had real world experiences which promotes coursework success. They spent every day with access to professional teachers and administrators who supported their educational efforts and wanted them to succeed.



### *Interview Themes*

Themes that emerged from the before mentioned interviews were obtained first from the original six cohort participants interviewed for this study. Additional themes were collected from the focus group activity that included six additional noninterviewed members of the 16-member cohort along with three of the original six cohort participants interviewed for this study. This provided the researcher with data collected from 12 of the original 16-member cohort group (one of the cohort members was deceased, two were not available, and one chose not to participate in the study). Finally, themes collected from two special education supervisors were excellent sources in gathering richer data to support findings.

The data obtained and coded from in-depth interviews of cohort participants, noninterviewed focus group members, and special education supervisors provided the researcher the evidence required to gain insights and perceptions in answering the following research questions:

#### *Research Question 1*

How did the Tennessee Department of Education, East Tennessee State University, and Sevier County Schools combine resources to address teacher shortages in special education in East Tennessee?

#### *Conclusion 1*

This was accomplished from leadership and vision from ETSU staff, Sevier County, and the Tennessee Department of Education. In the ETSU Special Education Grant's statement of needs, it is clear they had the vision of creating a cohort program that would increase the demands of producing licensed special education teachers in rural East Tennessee. Both supervisors interviewed commented that the concept, scope, and sequence of the grant proved to

be an excellent method of recruiting paraprofessionals into the teaching environment. Other comments from supervisors of how the cohort design allowed participants the benefit of continuing to work with students and certified teachers was another example of how these combined resources affected the program's success.

### *Research Question 2*

Did the creation of an alternative route to certify teachers prove to be appropriate in meeting teacher shortages in special education in East Tennessee?

### *Conclusion 2*

In comparison to national statistics of teacher attrition, the results of the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort indicate the grant met and exceeded its goal. The cohort started with 16 members. Currently 13 are teaching in special education, one cohort member is deceased, and two cohort members moved so that the other members do not know of their status. The comments from supervisors saying that 100% of those who completed the cohort were certified to teach in special education speaks volumes of the program's success.

The 2000 ETSU-Sevier County Cohort

### *Research Question 3*

What are the perceptions and lived experiences of those cohort members who completed the first ETSU-Sevier County Cohort?

### *Conclusion 3*

Comments from in-depth interviews and data from the focus group activity provided the researcher themes that were captured and coded of their perceptions and experiences. Group bonding, experience of working as a paraprofessional, access to local administrators, and financial support are examples of these collected themes.

The researcher was diligent in his efforts to ensure interviews were conducted in a professional manner, first by creating questions that were specific to their experiences while keeping in mind the quest to answer the research questions. Next in performing pilot interviews, this allowed the researcher practice and experience in capturing the essence of each person's individual journey experiences. Finally, coding themes that emerged from in-depth interviews not only answered the research questions but provided rich personal experiences that may be beneficial for future research.

### *Summary*

Chapter 4 includes the findings collected from the in-depth interviews. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in an attempt to find the essence of each person's experience as they went from paraprofessional to certified teacher. These experiences were described in specific detail as themes emerged pertaining to their feelings, perceptions, and essence of their journey.

The most dominant theme was the experience and background of paraprofessionals as they made their way to certified teacher. These experiences were helpful in a variety of ways. Examples include completing course work, developing instructional strategies, behavior management, coteaching, and providing training for their paraprofessionals. Another major theme was group bonding among the cohorts. This bonding provided them a support group in meeting the course work demands. Having access to local administrators who were their instructors and mentors was a consistent theme. Members of the cohort were supported by a 100% grant that provided the financial support necessary to make their journey possible; the necessity of that support was a common theme. The increased stress level, additional paper work, and responsibilities of being a certified teacher were other emerging themes. Time management

was a prevalent theme throughout their experience. Finally, the support and admiration from their colleges, professors, and family members were major themes in their completing the cohort and becoming certified teachers.

## CHAPTER 5

### RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This phenomenological study has provided the researcher the tools to examine the experiences of paraprofessionals as they made their journey from paraprofessional to certified teacher. After working in the education field for more than 35 years, with most of that time in special education, this study has provided me with the opportunity to investigate paraprofessionals, an area of education that I have always wanted to examine. This study gave me the opportunity to delve into findings relevant to paraprofessional cohort members and what they experienced during this adventure.

The data collected from interviewed cohort participants, special education supervisors, and uninterviewed cohort focus group members provided insight and information related to their personal experiences. As each participant shared his or her experiences, common themes began to appear. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings presented in Chapter 4, discusses the implications and conclusions from analyzing the data, and includes recommendations for future research.

#### *Addressing Teacher Shortages in Special Education in East Tennessee*

Data gathered throughout the study establish the need to address teacher shortages in special education, specifically in rural areas. It is important state and local school districts develop recruitment programs to address these shortages and provide students with disabilities professionals who are certified and highly qualified. As these shortages continue, research of current practices and in-depth analysis of alternative pathways must continue (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2007).

The primary means of collecting data were in-depth interviews guided by the research question: What is it like being a paraprofessional, going back to school, and now working as a teacher?

The assumption and possible reason for future research into addressing teacher shortages is that the majority of cohort participants are highly motivated and when their financial, emotional, family, and personal needs are being met the chances of success increase dramatically. The result is an experienced, well trained teacher who is more knowledgeable of how to manage paraprofessionals and one who is an advocate for parent involvement, understands local cultures, and is not likely to leave the community.

Findings from this study may assist universities, colleges, state departments of education, and federal agencies such as the Office of Special Education Programs about the need to develop alternative pathways to address teacher shortages. These pathways may provide schools with more experienced, dedicated teachers who are already grounded in their local environment and culture (Bernal & Aragon, 2004).

How and what are Tennessee's plans to address the increase of minorities enrolling in public schools when nationally minority teachers are diminishing (Hodgkinson, 2002)? In 2000 the Hispanic population in Tennessee totaled 2.2%. By 2010 that number increased to 3.7% and is expected to continue increasing (The Hispanic Population in Tennessee, 2004).

The dynamics and demographics of our public schools are changing and it is evident more emphasis must be placed on recruiting minority teachers. One obvious and often overlooked population in meeting these minority teacher shortages is paraprofessionals. Over 1.3 million paraprofessionals were working in our public schools in 2004, the majority being with students with disabilities. In many of these high poverty communities the majority of paraprofessionals are from racial and language minority groups (Burbank, Bates, & Schrum, 2009).

According to an article in 2007 in *The Tennessean*, Tennessee is making an effort to recruit minority teachers. The recruitment effort has prompted several universities to hire what is termed Hispanic advisors to assist in student recruiting. An example of this initiative is in 2007, 1.7% of the University of Tennessee's incoming freshman class was Hispanic. While some may see this as an improvement in recruiting minority students, specifically Hispanics, more must be done (Associated Press, 2007).

In 2009 a research brief conducted by the Tennessee Department of Education show, not surprisingly, that in 2006 students who attend high poverty/high minority schools have little chance of being taught by the state's most effective and experienced teachers. Many of these schools are classified by the Department of Education as a high priority school, which means that students did not meet specific academic benchmarks for 2 years running. High poverty schools are not always high priority and students deserve to be taught by highly effective teachers. However; this is not always the case. This study showed a strong correlation of high poverty/high minority schools that consistently remain on high priority lists. The other, and most disturbing statistic, is that these schools have a larger placement of beginning teachers, a smaller number of teachers who have master's degrees or higher, and fewer teachers who have met highly qualified status (Tennessee Department of Education, 2009).

While more than 54% of Tennessee teachers hold a master's degree or higher, Tennessee must do a better job of recruiting to ensure that minority populations are exposed to the same highly qualified, effective teachers as other students. Bottom line, the one variable that is constant in student achievement is good teaching. For minority students, specifically Hispanic students, having someone who is familiar with their culture and who is considered a highly

qualified, highly effective teacher is a strong recipe for success (Tennessee Tomorrow, Inc., 2002).

Across the nation a growing number of paraprofessionals, many of whom are minorities, are seeking professional licensure. Agencies such as the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) offer incentives for attracting these paraprofessionals into the teaching profession (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2004; Burbank, 2008; Keller, 2004), and designed to meet NCLB requirements.

Even though this study did not specifically address the dynamics of minorities on local schools systems, when you consider the local demographics of many of East Tennessee's schools, in the future, grants such as the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort may serve as a tool in developing programs that promote the increase in minority teachers.

Recognizing the social cultural factors within a community is a major first step in addressing the impact of minorities within the community. Students will perform at a higher level when emphasis is placed on the social relationships that exist within the school and community (UNICEF, 2009).

Although studies have been conducted on how to recruit minorities into the teaching profession, addressing strategies on how to inform institutes of higher education of the unique needs of minority individuals within the community has been lacking (Bennett, 2006). This lack of addressing the unique needs of individuals must be examined for future cohorts of all individuals both minority and otherwise.

#### *The Effect of Alternative Route to Certify Special Education Teachers in East Tennessee*

What is different about the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort is that 100% of those who completed the program were successful in earning special education teaching certification.



Currently 13 of the 16-member cohort are teaching in special education (81%); one cohort member is deceased and two cohort members moved so that the other members do not know of their status. From a national perspective of those who are in what is coined as a short-term alternative program only 34% continued to teach after 3 years. Nationally 84% those who were enrolled in a 4-year comprehensive cohort remained in the classroom over the same period of time (Darling-Hammond, 2003, p. 10).

### *The Perceptions and Lived Experiences of Cohort Members*

A study in Colorado (Bernal & Aragon, 2004) of the critical factors affecting paraprofessionals in their first 2 years of college while continuing to work at their assigned schools reflect many of the challenges and themes of the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort. As those in the Colorado study, many of the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort participants were the first in their family to graduate college and without financial support could not have attended college. Observations from this study and possible considerations for future cohorts are listed below.

### *Bonding and Social Network*

As was noted from the interviews, a bonding and social network theme developed within the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort participants as they made their journey from paraprofessional to certified teacher. This development was involuntary and no purposeful activity to address a social component was mentioned in the grant. Genzuck and Baca (1998) reported in a study of Latino students who went back to school to address the shortage of bilingual paraprofessionals in Colorado the importance of a concentrated effort in promoting a social cohort structure. According to studies conducted by Calderon; Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec, and Slavin (as cited in Genzuck & Baca, 1998), the idea of developing social cohort structures has shown

improvement in higher self-esteem, academic achievement, motivation to learn, and collaboration skills.

### *Addressing Social Change*

Another important finding from the Colorado study was the sponsorship of family activities to address the social changes that occur as these paraprofessionals make their educational journey. The goal of the family activities program is to assist families, making them aware of the many lifestyle changes they as well as their cohort participants are going to experience. The emphasis of family activities is to involve all family members and let them be part of the journey that in the end is a reward and celebration for everyone. Examples of planned family activities are listening to testimonies of people who already completed the cohort program, hearing motivational speakers, attending sessions on dealing with the stress of changes in schedules, and time management.

### *Researcher Perspective*

The research on alternative programs as a means of addressing teacher shortages is limited (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). We do, however, have more data of the effects of alternative programs and how to better plan for future programs. With more emphasis being placed on teacher evaluations and the fidelity of performance, more data will be available to determine future steps. The basis for developing alternative programs stemmed from the shortage of special education teachers. This model will likely carry over to other educational shortages.

What is proving to be a challenge for filling special education teacher positions in Tennessee is the recent legislative action that requires all special education teachers to be highly qualified. In 2009 the Tennessee State Board of Education passed a requirement that all students with disabilities have 22 credits in order to graduate with a regular education diploma. In order to receive credit for these classes students must pass end of course exams that are averaged with

their course grade. Prior to these requirements special education teachers were teaching in segregated classrooms or in inclusive classes. Along with the passage of the new high school diploma requirements special education teachers are now required to be highly qualified in their content area if they are to give credit for students taking end of course exams. In order to be highly qualified they must: (1) Go back to school and get certification in that area (for example they must be certified or highly qualified to give a math credit, specifically Algebra and Geometry) or (2) they must pass a PRAXIS test. The PRAXIS test costs the school system \$400 each. If they pass this test they immediately become highly qualified and can teach the class and give credit to that student. The challenge is many school systems are forced to place students with disabilities into general education classes under the inclusion option. The reason for this placement is this provides the teacher of record, the general education teacher, the authority to give credit. From conversation with surrounding school systems, many teachers are taking the test but not passing, forcing the school system to be more creative in placing students into these required classes (L. Campbell, personal communication, November 12, 2012).

Alternative route programs have been supported by many institutes of higher education (IHE) based on profits. Traditional programs have not kept up with the supply and demand of the educational market. Rotherham and Mead (2004) argue that IHEs support alternative route pathways based on the capital they bring to universities. Teacher preparation programs for both graduate and undergraduate students bring in approximately \$6.1 billion in annual tuition. This profit is primarily because of the use of adjunct professors, which results in low faculty cost for the IHEs. According to Connelly (2003) 24% of the teachers for students with disabilities are bypassing traditional routes in favor of alternative route programs. Simply put, alternative route

programs are significant in the educational market leaving IHEs little choice but to follow the trend of nontraditional educational pathways and increase their profit.

Along with these trends come questions of teachers being pedagogically prepared. The *I want it now attitude* is prevalent and with the demands placed on schools from state and federal agencies to close achievement gaps it is imperative that alternative route programs meet rigorous educational demands (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005; Zemsky, 1993). Meeting the demands of teacher shortage while addressing this with alternative route programs are important as we continue into the future of providing programs that deliver services.

### *Conclusions*

The results and findings of the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort have provided a strong conclusion in support of alternative routes to teacher certification. Notwithstanding traditional requirements and their place in preparing teachers to be highly skilled and qualified, all forms of teacher preparation programs including alternative pathways must be held to a high standard. We as educators who have a deep love for children and demand they be taught by skilled educators must continue to be diligent in our effort to see that all avenues are open in meeting our demands. We should not be content with teachers who have acceptable skills; instead, we must demand our children be taught by teachers with exceptional skills. This mind set begins with school boards, school directors, parents, and communities who devote time, energy, and resources to support teachers with ongoing high quality professional development. As Jim Collins noted in the monograph accompanying his book, *Good to Great*, when discussing the importance of hiring the right teachers, he wrote that we must hire the best and brightest and not settle for average (Collins, 2005).

Collins (2005) said that even the most experienced administrators hire average people largely because of not being around them and witnessing their work ethic. Whereas, those candidates chosen for the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort had all met the work ethic requirement and administrators knew up front the quality and experience of each candidate. As we continue the struggles of developing programs to produce excellent teachers, some will be successful, some will not. Regardless of what path we choose, there are common denominators that must be part of the process in producing excellent teachers.

*Practices for Consideration Based on the Present Study-Not for Generalization*

The researcher suggests further research in the form of a study on teacher effect data of those who have completed the ETSU-Sevier County Cohort could further substantiate the grant's goal of increasing the level of instructional skills of special education teachers. The research and personal journey in addressing teacher shortages, alternative routes to certification, teacher attrition, and the experiences of those paraprofessionals who have become teachers has prompted the following recommendations:

*Suggested Practice*

1. Adopt induction and mentoring programs to improve teacher attrition.
2. Follow the data: State Departments of Education review data and determine which systems are struggling to fill vacancies, including school districts with high minorities.
3. Diligently recruit minority teachers.
4. Improve efforts in selecting and training paraprofessionals. Historically teachers have had little to no input into the selection, hiring, training, or evaluation of paraprofessionals. In many rural school districts these paraprofessionals are hired with political overtones (French, 2001).

5. Special education teacher shortages and legal mandates assigning paraprofessionals to work with high incidence students are on the rise. Because many of these paraprofessionals are not properly trained, the least qualified personnel are placed in these settings, placing teachers in uncomfortable and possible litigation circumstances (Devlin, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2007a).
  - a. To address these efforts, first allow teachers to be part of the selection process of hiring and placing paraprofessionals. The next step is to develop training programs for teachers on how to appropriately supervise, train, and evaluate paraprofessionals (Mueller, 1997).
  - b. An example of the need to address these changes is the continued rise of students with autism. Training in functional behavior assessments, writing appropriate behavior plans, and positive behavioral supports would help in supporting teachers and the paraprofessionals they supervise (Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, & Goodwin, 2003).
6. Offer bonuses to fill vacancies for hard to recruit areas. According to directors of schools and teacher recruiters, filling classrooms with highly qualified certified teachers, specifically in the areas of special education, science, and math, continues to be a huge undertaking. Meeting these demands is a challenge in high poverty and rural areas (Shakrani, 2008).
7. Develop a social activities model to include family members. This model will ensure all family members who wish to be part of the cohort journey are recognized and seen as an important part of the cohort experience.

8. Provide ongoing support to address the potential challenges and stressors cohort and family members will encounter during this journey.

### *Suggested Research*

Data reflect that teacher preparation programs nationwide produce adequate numbers of teachers. However, many of the teachers leave the profession due to inadequate support. Any attempt in addressing teacher attrition must include a strong support system. The State Department of Education should maintain data to track retention of cohort members and coordinate recruitment efforts with institutes of higher education. Future research should include:

1. Design an evaluation instrument for paraprofessionals to find the best and brightest candidates to fill teacher vacancies. Even though paraprofessionals are required to pass specific tests to be considered highly qualified, in most states this is the only requirement in maintaining employment.
2. With so much emphasis being placed on teacher evaluations, states should look into developing paraprofessional evaluations including rubrics similar to those designed for teacher evaluations.

Research has shown that after 3 years 33% of teachers leave the field of education and after 5 years 45% resign their positions (Ponick, Keating, Pontiff, & Wilcox, 2003). To address this attrition challenge state departments of education, institutes of higher education, and local school systems should design a Beginning Teacher Support Assessment Program (BSTA) similar to the California model. Programs designed to mentor, support, and provide ongoing training will ensure these teachers are highly qualified and are seen as prized professionals.

### *Summary*

Chapter 5 is a summary of the findings presented in Chapter 4. This chapter also provides the reader conclusions, recommendations, and assumptions specific to teacher shortages. It is my hope that findings from this chapter will provide all entities involved with teacher recruitment information on the development of alternative pathways in addressing teacher shortages. Specific attention is provided on the efforts to recruit minority teachers due to the lack of studies currently available. Chapter 5 concludes with recommendations for current and future practices along with suggested research. In the future researchers interested in this topic may want to approach their studies with consideration of factors revealed in this study.



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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Permission Letter to Reprint Chart

On Fri, Jun 8, 2012 at 3:30 PM, Emily Feistritzer<[emilyf@ncei.com](mailto:emilyf@ncei.com)> wrote:

Dear Robert (soon to be Dr. Winstead, it appears!),

Yes, you may use any charts and data in the “Profile of Teachers in the U.S. 2011” publication.

Good luck with your dissertation!

Emily

C. Emily Feistritzer, Ph. D  
President and CEO  
National Center for Education Information  
National Center for Alternative Certification  
4401A Connecticut Ave., NW #212  
Washington, DC 20008  
[202-822-8280](tel:202-822-8280)  
[emilyf@ncei.com](mailto:emilyf@ncei.com)  
[www.teach-now.org](http://www.teach-now.org)

From: Robert Winstead [<mailto:robertwinsteadseal@gmail.com>]

Sent: 08 June 2012 14:48

To:[emilyf@ncei.com](mailto:emilyf@ncei.com)

Subject: Permission to use charts/graphs

Ms. Feistritzer,

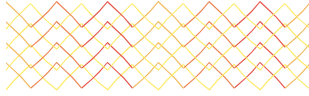
My name is Robert Winstead. I work for the Tennessee Department of Education and am working on my dissertation through East Tennessee State University located in the Eastern Region of Tennessee. My dissertation topic is a study of paraprofessionals in the local area who went back to college and are now certified special education teachers. My purpose in contacting you is to request permission to use some of the charts/graphs from the Profile of Teachers in the U.S. 2011. This is wonderful document and would help in my literature reviews specifically the information on alternative pathways to certification chart 13 page 22.

Thank you and I look forward to hearing from you.

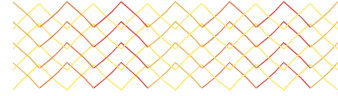
Robert

## APPENDIX B

### Permission Letter to School District



**Robert A. Winstead**



Director \_\_\_\_\_

My name is Robert A. Winstead, doctoral student at East Tennessee State University (ETSU). I am writing to ask your permission to conduct doctoral research in your school system. My study is focused on teachers who obtained their special education certification by completing the first East Tennessee State University-Tennessee Department of Education/Division of Special Education Cohort Program (2000-2004). This grant was designed to assist paraprofessionals in becoming certified special education teachers. Prior to completing the ETSU Cohort Program, these teachers were previously employed in your system as paraprofessionals. I am requesting your permission to conduct interviews with six special education teachers and the special education supervisor. Should other interviews become necessary, I will notify you and seek further permission. The interviews will ask questions relating to their experience as a paraprofessional prior to becoming a special education teacher and their experience as a teacher for the past few years.

At your request, the results of my study will be available to you after its completion. However, the individual responses must be kept confidential. I have included a copy of my interview questions for your review. If you wish to call me my number is 423-912-2525. Thank you for your time, and I hope to receive your permission to work with your staff.

Thank you,

Robert A. Winstead  
Doctoral Student at East Tennessee State University

## VITA

ROBERT A. WINSTEAD

Personal Data:                      Date of Birth: December 22, 1953  
   Place of Birth: Sneedville, Tennessee  
   Marital Status: Married

Education:                              Public Schools and Tennessee Department of Education

   B.S. Physical Education and Health, Minor Psychology, Lincoln  
   Memorial University, Harrogate, Tennessee 1975

   M.A. Administration and Supervision, Union College,  
   Barbourville, Kentucky 1981

   M.A. Special Education, University of Tennessee, Knoxville,  
   Tennessee 1984

   Ed.D. Educational Leadership, East Tennessee State University,  
   Johnson City, Tennessee 2013

Professional Experience:

1975-1976      Food Stamp Certification, TN Department of Human Services, Sneedville, TN  
1978-1982      Teacher, Seal-Mathis Elementary, Hancock County Schools Sneedville, TN  
1982-1998      Supervisor of Special Education, Hancock County Schools, Sneedville, TN  
1982-1994      Supervisor of Adult Basic Education, Hancock County Schools, Sneedville, TN  
1982-1994      Supervisor of Attendance, Hancock County Schools, Sneedville, TN  
1999-2003      Compliance Consultant, Tennessee Department of Education, Knoxville, TN  
2003-2012      Director of Regional Resource Center, Tennessee Department of Education,  
   Knoxville, TN

Publications:                              Closing the Achievement Gap: All Students Our Students (2004).  
   The publication achieved national recognition from the Office of  
   Special Education (OSEP) in Washington, D.C.

Honors and Awards:                              Recently selected (July 18, 2013) to represent Hancock County  
   School District to serve on the Powell Educational Advisory  
   Board. The Board's mission is to bring professional development  
   and best practices to school districts in East Tennessee.