HIGHLY QUALIFIED SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS: 
HAVE THEY BEEN “LEFT BEHIND”? 

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ABSTRACT

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) requires that all teachers obtain “highly qualified teacher” (HQT) status in the specific content areas that they were assigned to teach. Many experienced special education teachers, although certified to work with children with disabilities, did not have a content area specialty, and therefore were not considered highly qualified under NCLB. This phenomenological study conducted a series of three interviews in which a sample of 9 teachers were asked to share their perceptions of HQT based on the following questions:

- What steps have these teachers taken to become “highly qualified” and what challenges, if any, did they face in the process?
- How has the school district adapted programs to accommodate the changes in qualifications of the special education teachers?
- How do the special education teachers perceive the changes, if any, and how have they affected the children they have been assigned to teach?

The participants of this study shared their rich and varied educational backgrounds; they have acquired valuable life experiences and taken advantage of various professional development opportunities to prepare them for their positions as special education teachers. The nine special educators in this study discussed how they felt the “highly qualified teacher” mandate affected them professionally, and more specifically, their job assignments. For the most part, the participants of this study did not feel that the HQT process affected their job assignments. All but one believed that content knowledge is important.
The teachers’ perceptions of HQT have been an essential part of this study. Most felt that it is necessary that teachers who are competent and knowledgeable should teach students. However, while the teachers generally agreed that both regular and special education teachers should be equipped with the skills necessary to service all students, some felt that the “highly qualified teacher” label does not necessarily make a good teacher, and not all felt that having HQT status would benefit the students. Some of the teachers also believed that in-class support has not positively affected the students. They discussed how some students with special needs are struggling in general education classes.

The HQT aspect of NCLB has been a necessary revision to education law, but it has been a controversial subject that has caused much debate in many areas of education. The “Highly Qualified Special Education Teacher” should be recognized as valuable for the knowledge of disabilities, teaching strategies and behavioral techniques.
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Statement of the Problem

The field of special education has faced many challenges throughout the years, including increasing numbers of students requiring services, and a shortage of educators going into special education. Although those who enter special education are certified to work with students with disabilities and are willing to further their knowledge to teach, teacher quality has become an issue. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002, requires that all teachers, including special educators, meet a specific set of requirements to demonstrate content knowledge. This law includes a mandate for what is known as the “highly qualified teacher” (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2003).

According to the Committee on Education and the Workforce (2002), “far too many disadvantaged students are taught by teachers who may be unqualified to teach the subjects they teach” (p. 1). As a result, the law requires that states take responsibility for “ensuring teacher quality” (Boehner, 2002, p. 2). By the end of the 2005-2006 school year, teachers were required to be able to show that they were knowledgeable and qualified in the subjects they teach (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2004). Legislators attempted to align special education laws with NCLB through the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), mandating that special education teachers meet some standards of quality as teachers of general education under the reauthorization (Samuels, 2005, cited in Irons & Harris, 2007, p. 35).

At the time of the original mandate many U.S. high school special education teachers were not deemed “highly qualified”; they did not hold bachelor’s degrees or had not passed the appropriate tests in the subjects they were assigned to teach (Davis, 2004).
Irons and Harris (2007) pointed out that although they had been issued teaching certificates to work with children with disabilities, they did not have a content area specialty, therefore they were not considered highly qualified under NCLB (p. 35). “Many special education teachers have years of experience teaching a variety of content areas. Such teachers could have a bachelor’s degree in elementary education and a master’s degree in special education, or vice versa.” (p. 35).

These special education teachers have been placed in a precarious position. A July 15, 2004 report by the Government Accountability Office stated that by the end of the 2005-2006 school year, many teachers would not be prepared to work in states that require subject-matter competence. (p. 3). Irons and Harris (2007) pointed out that “a number of states are not able to meet the NCLB mandate that a highly qualified teacher is assigned to every classroom by the end of 2005-2006 year” (p. 35). According to the 2006 “NCLB State Report” issued by the New Jersey Department of Education, 3.5% of classes were not taught by highly qualified teachers during the 2005-2006 school year.

There has also been some opposition to this law, which has been criticized for its inconsistencies and vagueness. The inconsistency became more evident in a 2006 report by U.S. Department of Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, in which the results of a Peer Review of Revised State Plans of each state was to make an effort to ensure a highly-qualified teacher in every classroom before the 2006-2007 school year. The Peer Reviewers put together a six-point protocol to examine how states addressed the “Highly Qualified Teacher mandate (HQT). The results showed that only nine states had acceptable plans, while four “did not sufficiently meet any of the criteria outlined by the
peers” (p. 1). The remaining 39, including Puerto Rico and District of Columbia, partially met the requirement according to peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2006).

Although the present literature has discussed the impact of the HQT mandate on teacher quality and presented information about the process, little has been written to express the feelings and experiences of the teachers who are affected by the mandate. This study will provide a “voice” for special education teachers, and allow these teachers to share the steps they took, and any challenges they faced while completing the “highly qualified teacher” process. This study will provide insight into the rarely discussed perceptions and experiences of special education teachers and ultimately how this has impacted their students.

This study examines the experiences of special education teachers with the NCLB “Highly Qualified Teacher” mandate. The study addresses the following three research questions:

• What steps have these teachers taken to become “highly qualified” and what challenges, if any, did they face in the process?

• How has the school district adapted programs to accommodate the changes in qualifications of the special education teachers?

• How do the special education teachers perceive the changes, if any, and how have they affected the children they have been assigned to teach?
Literature Review

The literature reviewed for this study discusses the definitions and implications of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), including the requirements for consideration as a “Highly Qualified Teacher”. The literature will also outline the requirements for teaching children with disabilities, as well as the method by which special education teachers will be able to acquire “highly qualified teacher” status.

There has been much opposition to the law, especially the discrepancies between what has been required of special education teachers in the past and what the present law requires, raising issues of teacher quality with otherwise experienced teachers. The literature will discuss this opposition, and raise the issue of the already existing problem of the shortage of special education teachers in the U.S., and ways to deal with this shortage.

An additional issue is the perception of special education teachers who have been assigned as in-class support teachers within general education classes. This literature review has been divided to address the following areas: “Highly Qualified Teacher”, special education certification, opposition to the process, and shortage of special education teachers, and special education teachers’ perceptions.

In recent years, there has been research examining the perceptions of special education teachers who have had to undergo the HQT process. This review will also discuss some of this recent research and the findings of the studies.
No Child Left Behind: The “Highly Qualified Teacher”

One of the main components of the No Child Left Behind Act is the mandate that students were to be taught by “highly qualified” teachers by the 2005-2006 school year (Berry, 2004). Under NCLB, a “highly qualified teacher“ holds a bachelor’s degree and full state certification, and is able to demonstrate content knowledge in every academic subject he or she teaches (Reese, 2004, p. 34). The law requires that states take responsibility for “ensuring teacher quality” (Boehner, 2002, p. 2).

NCLB allows flexibility for experienced teachers to demonstrate subject matter competency; states are able to create assessments that are tailored to subjects and level of instruction. In New Jersey, passing the Praxis II exams in specific content areas without having the college credits that would lead to certification in that academic content satisfies the requirement to show content area preparation. Accruing ten points in an alternative method known as HOUSSE (High, Objective, Uniform State Standard of Evaluation) may also be used as evidence of content area preparation (NJ Dept. of Education, 2004). Reese (2004) pointed out that the HOUSSE method “allows for current teachers to demonstrate subject matter competency that recognizes the experience, expertise and professional training they have acquired during their years in the teaching profession.” The HOUSSE method is also to be used by states to assist multi-subject teachers in demonstrating subject matter knowledge through a “streamlined evaluation process” (Reese, p. 35).

In April 2008, New Jersey filed with the U.S. Department of Education to reinstate the HOUSSE Standard for two additional years to “provide an additional avenue for veteran special education teachers to use to meet highly qualified requirements” and
“to provide school districts with needed flexibilities in utilizing staff” (p. 1). The updated version of the New Jersey HOUSSE Standard Content Knowledge Matrix allows points for presentation at school- or district-level in-service programs, to be included with the 10 points needed to retain highly qualified status. (NJ Dept. of Education, 2009).

A clause for “Flexibility Under IDEA” for new special education teachers has been added as well. This new provision allows for “first year special education teachers who teach multiple content areas in middle or secondary settings and who have passed a content test or held a degree in math, science or language arts up to two years from their date of hire to demonstrate content expertise in the remaining content areas they teach” (p. 18). They may use the HOUSSE matrix to acquire 10 points, or may pass the relevant exams. This also applies to veteran teachers who have been assigned to teach special education for the first time (NJ Dept. of Education, 2009).

Tracy and Walsh (2004) pointed out that most teachers have been traditionally trained with an emphasis on pedagogy instead of subject matter knowledge. They reported that in 2003, according to the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 94% of certified teachers did not have a college major in their assigned subjects; this included one-half of all secondary teachers, one-quarter of whom also lacked a minor in their assigned subjects (p. 1).

Although the U.S. Department of Education stressed the importance of content knowledge, Kaplan and Owings (2003) asserted that “it is clear that teachers who learn and practice sound pedagogical techniques can affect students’ measured achievement” (pp. 689-690). They also pointed to research that suggests that teachers without teacher preparation in areas such as effective classroom management skills can be less effective
in helping students learn. Kaplan and Ownigs (2003) cited a study by Williamson-McDiarmid and Wilson (1991) that demonstrated that teachers with only subject matter knowledge were unable to integrate their subject knowledge with teaching practices to allow effective intervention (p. 690).

Special Education certification

To meet the requirements of New Jersey Administrative Code, Title 6A, Chapter 14: Special Education, Section 1.2 (b13), school districts must ensure that “all personnel serving students with disabilities are appropriately certified and licensed where a license is required, in accordance with State and Federal law” (p. 5). Under Section 4.6 (c), it states, “A teacher providing supplementary instruction shall be appropriately certified either for the subject or the level in which instruction is given” (p. 79).

According to No Child Left Behind, special education teachers who teach students core academic subjects must meet the requirements of “high qualification” (Reese, 2004). A letter to Chief School Administrators and Charter School Administrators from The Offices of Academic and Professional Standards and Special Education, dated January 30, 2004, outlined the requirements for special education teachers to become highly qualified: A special education teacher is required to hold a bachelor’s degree and standard New Jersey “Teacher of Handicapped” certification, as well as “show content area preparation in the academic subject or subjects for which the teacher is the primary provider of direct instruction (either as a replacement teacher in a resource setting or as a teacher in a self-contained class)” (NJ Dept. of Education, 2004).
Section 4.5 (e) of the New Jersey Administrative Code, Title 6A outlines the role of the special educator in an in-class resource setting:

Consultation as a service on behalf of a student with disabilities or a group of students with disabilities may be provided … a teacher of students with disabilities … to the general education teacher and/or the teacher aide. Such consultation shall be specified in each student’s IEP (p. 79).

Reese (2004) stated the need for flexibility in the area of special education in regard to the HQT mandate:

Special educators who do not provide direct instruction in core academic subjects, or who provide only consultation to highly qualified teachers in adapting curricula, using behavioral supports and inventions, or selecting appropriate accommodations, do not need to demonstrate subject-matter competency in those subjects (p.34).

Similarly, Quigney (2009) discussed the placement of special education teachers:

In addition to supplanting general education instruction, which requires highly qualified teacher documentation, secondary special educators may be asked to supplement what students are learning through general education and/or to act as consultants to other educators (p. 52).

**Opposition to the “Highly Qualified Teacher” process**

**Discrepancy and Inconsistency**

Boyer and Mainzer (2003) noted the “commitment to continued learning” of special education teachers, referring to 1995 data that reported that more special
education teachers hold Master’s degrees than do general education teachers. Of these teachers with Master’s degrees, 12% were working on additional degrees (p. 9). However, a July 15, 2004 report released by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) stated that thousands of special education teachers were not acting on the mandate to become “highly qualified” by the 2005-2006 school year. The GAO reported that “in the states that require subject-matter competence, special education teachers assigned to teach core academic subjects might not have the qualifications they need by the close of the 2005-2006 school year” (US Government Accountability Office, 2004).

The GAO cited a lack of coordination at the federal level as one possible cause for the inaction, pointing out that IDEA regulates qualifications for special education teachers (p. 16). However, IDEA, reauthorized in November 2004, has paralleled its provisions on “highly qualified” teachers with those of NCLB. Opponents of the teacher-qualification provision expressed disappointment that the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA did not include considerations for veteran teachers, such as allowing an additional year to meet the standards (Samuels & Robeline, 2004, p. 3).

Tracy and Walsh (2004) examined 20 states’ HOSSE processes for teachers having at least three years’ experience. They revealed inconsistencies and inadequate practices, listing five common problems: (a) most state standards are irrelevant to subject matter competency, (b) many states have been unwilling to change their processes, (c) many states’ standards are unnecessarily complex, (d) some states’ standards are laden with loopholes that allow inadequate teachers to falsely prove competency, and (e) there are inconsistent standards between the states (pp. 4-5). Samuels (2005) also pointed out
this inconsistency, stating that many teachers were not familiar with state HOUSSE plans, and were confused about requirements.

Irons and Harris (2007) pointed out how the HOUSSE evaluation standards differed from state to state, allowing “loopholes through which teachers not having sufficient content credit may use experience, professional development, and classroom information to obtain highly qualified status” (p. 35). They also noted, “not all states had a HOUSSE evaluation in place, causing extreme anxiety for special education teachers in those states (Irons & Harris, 2007, p.35).

Brownell, Hirsch and Seo (2004) pointed out the discrepancy between what they called the “federal policymakers’ definition of qualified teachers, particularly at the secondary level,” and the definition of a qualified special education teacher who is knowledgeable in the implementation of research-based instructional strategies and use of assessment with children with disabilities. The authors asserted that this issue has placed pressure on state and district administrators to “recruit and retain teachers who can raise student achievement in special education, while receiving confusing messages about how to do so” (Brownell et al., 2004, p. 9).

Similarly, Rotherham and Mead (2003) pointed out that while NCLB defines “fully qualified” as expertise in subject matter for middle and high school teachers, it does not address the “evidence-based pedagogical skills and knowledge” that certain subjects such as special education require for teacher effectiveness (p. 74). Samuels (2005) discussed the importance of knowing how to work with students with special needs as well as content knowledge. According to the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, teachers can become highly qualified without special education teaching experience, with
just the passage of a state-created test, which is not satisfactory to organizations such as Council for Exceptional Children (p.23).

**Diminishing Roles of Special Education Teachers**

Quigney (2009) pointed to another issue that has arisen as a result of HQT. Special education teachers who have not been able to fulfill the highly qualified teacher requirement may have limited participation in inclusive classrooms, acting as consultants to the general education teachers. Quigney recognized that although this is an “important aspect of the educational process… they do not require validation of competency in subject matter areas”, and are therefore viewed as “less vital to the educational process”, not seen as instructional partners, but perceived as “highly trained aides or paraprofessionals” (p.52).

Nichols, Dowdy and Nichols (2010) cited the 2005 study of Mastropieri and colleagues in which they examined the roles of general and special education teachers in high school world history classes. They reported that general education teachers took the dominant role in the classroom. The special education teachers were “comfortable with their role due to a lack of core content knowledge and students did tend to view the special education teacher as an assistant, rather than as a teacher” (Mastropieri et. al, 2005, as cited in Nichols et. al, 2010).

**Shortage of Special Education Teachers**

The issue of the “highly qualified teacher” could possibly exacerbate an already existent problem in the education community; there is a shortage of qualified special
education teachers in the United States. From 1990 to 1999, the number of educators teaching children with disabilities in the U.S. grew by 11%, while the number of students aged 6-21 receiving services increased 30% during that same period (Boyer & Mainzer, 2003, p. 8). In addition to the disproportionate growth, Simpson, Whelan and Zabel (1993) cited factors such as “insufficient or inaccessible teacher training opportunities”, “lack of sufficient incentives”, and high attrition rates. They also pointed out that there are “thousands of untrained persons” who are the “primary service providers for students with special needs” (Simpson et al., 1993, p. 11).

According to Billingsley (2002), beginning special education teachers are at a high risk of attrition due to the demanding nature of teaching special education and the lack of sufficient certification (p. 5). Many states have implemented teacher induction programs offering opportunities for mentorship, professional development, and support for beginning teachers (Brownell et al., 2004, p. 57). In addition, Bergent and Burnette (as cited in Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003) mentioned the failure of colleges and universities to prepare enough trained professionals (p. 249).

Brownell, Hirsch and Seo (2004) cited the work of Griffin (as cited in Brownell et al., 2004), who found that beginning special education teachers sought the guidance of experienced special education teachers to develop their skills. Beginning teachers also felt they were expected to “serve in many roles, have a wide range of expertise, and often serve students across grade levels and disability groups . . . have a broader range of knowledge about curriculum and interventions than many general educators” (p. 58). These expectations, along with that of providing “direct instruction while coordinating efforts of professionals and parents” create the need for induction programs that will suit
the needs of new special education teachers (Griffin, as cited in Brownell et al., 2004, p. 58).

Katsiyannis, Zhang, and Conroy (2003) examined the annual Congressional reports over a ten-year period, the school years between 1988-1989 and 1998-1999, to analyze data revealing the national shortage of fully certified special education teachers. Their results revealed that there was a decrease in the teacher shortage rate beginning in the 1993-1994 school year, and continued in subsequent years. They attributed this phenomenon to such factors as the “expanding use of alternate and/or emergency certification in special education”, and the increasing number of students receiving services in included settings (Katsiyannis et al., 2003, p. 249).

Simpson, Whelan and Zabel (1993) offered the challenge that educators in the 21st century debate the advantage of recruiting “nontraditional teaching personnel”- those who hold undergraduate degrees in other areas did not have experiences outside of special education. They encouraged the development of “empirically validate(d) training methodologies” to prepare these individuals to work with students with disabilities. This effort, through the implementation of “modified teacher education curricula, experiences, and methods” would help alleviate the shortage of special education personnel (Simpson et al., 1993, p. 9).

Through a 2007 survey study, Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar and Misra described special education alternative route (AR) teacher preparation programs. They examined the need for special education teachers, especially for students of diverse cultural backgrounds. The authors pointed out that although most AR programs are designed with content area in mind, it is critical to consider the “range of competencies (e.g.
behavior management, social skills, instruction, and content enhancements) required of educators who deliver high-quality, comprehensive educational to students with the range of special needs that students with exceptionalities exhibit” (Council for Exceptional Children, 2003; Neel, Cessna, Borock & Bechard, 2003; Rosenberg, Sindelar & Hardman, 2004; as cited in Rosenberg et al., 2007, p. 225).

Rosenberg and colleagues (2007) found the following information based on respondents from 25 states and Washington D.C.: (a) there is still no uniformity in the amount of university involvement in training providing AR programs, although some do offer certification programs and support; (b) most AR programs in special education adhere to the U.S. Department of Education’s (2004) suggested practice of “recruiting widely and selecting carefully”; (c) there were a number of general education candidates who moved to special education, which might be used to enter the teaching profession and later switch; (d) the largest group of participants are mid-career changers, who came from other professions into teaching; (e) many special education AR programs are similar to traditional teacher preparation programs, requiring coursework and supervised fieldwork, having strict standards (Rosenberg et al., 2007, p. 233).

Thornton, Peltier and Medina (2007) asserted that the demands of fulfilling the requirements of NCLB have significantly impacted the shortage of special education teachers. They cited the lack of “highly qualified” candidates as a major concern, pointing out that although alternative certification programs may be faster, they do not “adequately prepare preservice teachers for the realities of the classroom and were not able to provide support systems for new classroom teachers” (Moore, Johnson, and
Birkeland, 2006, as cited in Thornton et.al, 2007, p. 4). Thornton and his colleagues pointed out teachers who are not well prepared for their jobs are more likely to quit.

Darling-Hammond (2004) suggested the need for a federal policy not unlike the 1963 Health Professions Assistance Act that was implemented to, among other things, improve the caliber of medical training and implement incentives for physicians to train in shortage specialties. Darling-Hammond outlined a federal teacher policy that will: recruit new teachers in high-need areas, strengthen teachers’ preparation, and improve teacher retention and effectiveness. (Darling- Hammond, 2004, p. 29).

Special Education Teachers’ Perceptions

In recent years, researchers have begun to examine how special educators perceive the “Highly Qualified Teacher” mandate under NCLB. Sheradin (2006), through a phenomenological study, examined the experiences of 15 high school special education teachers in a rural district in North Carolina who needed to fulfill the requirements of the HQT mandate. Using an interview format, Sheradin determined that special education teachers did not view themselves as valued employees. The teachers in this study also discussed the lack of support from general education, administration, and parents. Sheridan pointed to the amount of stress that special education teachers experienced undergoing the process, and suggested a need to examine the stress the students faced as well.

Smith (2006) conducted a study comprised of surveys, interviews and focus groups, in which the perceptions of special education teachers regarding the HQT mandate were examined. It also looked at how the teachers felt the mandate would

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*Special Education Teachers’ Perceptions*

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impact their employment. The study focused on three school districts in Maricopa County, Arizona. Smith found, through the surveys, that teachers felt the mandate was “unreasonable”; they experienced frustration and confusion, and some would seek other positions. In the “Teacher Focus Group Findings”, it was determined that teachers felt the mandate would negatively impact finding competent teachers who enjoy teaching.

Saunders (2007) conducted a study in which the perceptions of four special education teachers were examined. It pointed out the frustration that was felt over “lack of information and guidance provided from the principal, school district and the state” (p. 6). The teachers in the study also discussed the financial impact that the mandate had, as they paid for tests and additional classes.

Two of the three studies indicated that teachers felt there was a need for school districts to provide training and support for special education staff to facilitate changes to their programs involving HQT status. Smith (2006) referred to a detailed training plan “for all teachers and support staff who will be involved in any special education delivery changes” (p. 91). Saunders (2007) pointed to research that indicates, “teachers are rarely included in the decision-making process that impacts professional development, growth, and change” (p. 62).

Sheradin’s 2006 study, however, took a closer look at how special education teachers felt their college and university training prepared them for their profession. The findings were that inadequate preparation led to high attrition rates in the field of special education. Although the teachers on all three studies did not disagree with the need for qualified teachers, they expressed a lack of support in the preparation for becoming “highly qualified” according to the law.
Methodology

Data Collection

Background

According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), a phenomenological interview assumes “that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated” (p. 112). The purpose of phenomenological interviewing is “to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share” (p. 112). There is a common process that most of the teachers went through in complying with the law; the purpose of this study was to interview special education teachers about their experiences with the “Highly Qualified Teacher” mandate of NCLB. It is important that those who are most affected by the law be given an opportunity to share their feelings and to describe the meaning of their experiences.

The “Three-Interview Series” described by Seidman (1998, pp. 11-12) was used to organize the data collection (see Appendix A for interview questions). The first of the three interviews, focus life history, is designed to “put the participant’s experience in context” (p. 12). The special educators were asked to discuss their academic careers- the undergraduate and/or graduate courses they took in preparation for their teaching certificates- as well as any extracurricular activities that they felt helped prepare them for teaching students with special needs.

The next interview, details of experience, “concentrated on the concrete details of participants’ present experience in the topic area of the study” (Seidman, 1998, p. 12). At this point, the teachers were asked to describe their positions as content area or in-class
support teachers. They were also asked to discuss the professional development they have acquired to hone their skills in the subject areas in which they are assigned.

Seidman (1998) discussed the third interview, reflect on the meaning, as the one in which “participants are asked to reflect on the meaning of their experience . . . addresses the intellectual and emotional connection between the participants’ work and life” (p.12). The participants were asked to discuss how the “Highly Qualified Teacher” aspect of NCLB affected them, in light of the preparation and effort they have put into their careers in this field. They also discussed how HQT affected their jobs, how they felt other special educators were affected, and the affect of HQT on their students. This discussion, along with the previous steps, “make meaning” of the experiences of the teachers (Seidman, p. 12).

Subjects

Nine experienced special education teachers who have been assigned to teach content-area subjects and in-class support classes shared the educational and professional backgrounds of and discussed their experiences with NCLB and HQT. Their stories are told from the perspective of the nine teachers. The teachers all had rich stories to tell about how they became special educators and why they continue to work with children with special needs. Although they understood the parameters of the law and why it’s important, they had strong opinions and ideas about its implementation. Quotes that capture their personalities were used to bring forth how the teachers’ passion for what they do is portrayed.

Thirty-three school districts in four counties in New Jersey were contacted for participation in this study during the 2009-2010 school year. Five schools responded
with names of special education teachers willing to participate. At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, 12 districts were either contacted again, or for the first time.¹ Six of the seven participating schools were located in the same county, although not in close proximity to one another. The remaining school was located in a neighboring county. The schools represented a range of incomes and ethnicities within both suburban and urban populations. Demographic information from the 2008-2009 N.J. Department of Education “School Report Card” about each school district has been included to provide the settings in which the participants were working.

Wolcott (1994) discussed presentation of the participants who are central to a study as though the researcher is “staging a play”, introducing the “main characters” (p. 20). The seven women and two men who shared their experiences have arrived at their current positions from diverse experiences, educational and professional backgrounds. The nine special education teachers in this study responded to the first set of interview questions about their coursework, experience, and extracurricular activities. The information obtained from that inquiry has been used to summarize their collective academic experience and preparation. In addition, reflective responses from the third set of interviews have been incorporated to create a rich description of the participants in this study.

Liz and Betty were both employed at Municipal High School, a 9-12 regional high school serving two suburban districts. Municipal reported 8.6% of their 1024 students during the 2008-2009 school year as having IEPS- Individual Educational Plans-with seven students listed as being “in specialized classes” (2008-2009 NJ School Report

¹ The names of the school and teachers have been changed to protect anonymity.

Liz has been certified as a Teacher of Students with Disabilities for seven years. Her interest in Special Education began with her son’s diagnosis of ADHD. She researched his condition, and soon decided to pursue a teaching certificate and Masters in Special Education in addition to her BS in Neuropsychology. Liz said: “My husband has ADHD… and my son is a little Asperger’s, too, and he had depression at times… so I had a lot to offer… I just had to learn how to teach students to learn” (Liz, personal communication, April 21, 2010).

Liz was highly qualified in science, math, and English, and was certified in multiple states, having passed five Praxis exams to become certified in Special Education. She explained that her “license transfers practically anywhere because of the amount of Praxis exams [she’s] taken”. Liz believed it is beneficial to acquire certifications in as many states as possible: “I can go pretty far, and go to different states . . . So I’m getting my fourth certification because we don’t know what’s happening here” (Liz, personal communication, April 21, 2010).

Liz was assigned as a co-teacher in two English classes, as well as a resource room teacher for three periods. Liz’s professional development included a certificate from a three-day seminar in Differentiating Instruction; workshops in severe physical impairment, and curriculum-writing and co-teaching seminars. She believed that special education teachers have a difficult job because “they make special ed teachers to be the jack of all trades” (Liz, personal communication, April 21, 2010).
Betty was assigned as an American Sign Language (ASL) instructor in the World Language Department, teaching “regular, traditional students ASL as a language” (Betty, personal communication, April 22, 2010). She also taught one algebra class in a resource room. She began her career right out of high school as a sign language interpreter. She completed a County College program, and went on to pursue a Bachelor’s degree as a “Teacher of the Deaf”, which was accompanied by the “Teacher of the Handicapped” certification. Betty obtained a certificate in teaching math to deaf students as part of a grant from Galludet University in Washington, D.C. Betty described her professional development as “everything under the sun”. Although Betty has been assigned to teach various classes over her 25 years of teaching- Biology, Earth Science, Driver’s Ed, Health, Reading, English- she was highly qualified only in math.

Jessica was assigned to classes at Apex High School, which was located in a residential/business community that covers a broad economic and ethnic section. It served grades 10-12, with an approximate enrollment of 1035 students during the 2008-2009 school year. 12.9 percent of the students were classified as “Special Education”; three students were listed as attending specialized classes (2008-2009 NJ School Report Card).

Jessica started out as an Elementary Education major and took on Special Education as a dual major “to make [herself] more marketable” although it wasn’t her “initial passion”. She has been certified for eight years in two states; she stated: “It’s something I’ve kind of grown to like and now I think I’ll stay in this field” (Jessica, personal communication, April 28, 2010). Jessica was also a certified reading specialist and was involved with the National Writing Project. She had worked with struggling
readers through a work-study program formerly called “America Reads”. Jessica was highly qualified in English at the high school level. She is currently assigned as an in-class support teacher in three English classes at the time of the interview. She also taught a replacement reading class and a study skills course. Jessica had just been informed that she would be doing one or two sections of a reading elective the following school year.

Donna had taught at North High School for 33 years. North was located in a suburban community of low- to middle-income families; it was described as “meeting needs of an ethnically and culturally diverse student body”. 11.9 percent of the 1218 students were reported as “Special Education”, with eight students in specialized classes. North High School promised: “We will cultivate respect, self-esteem and the desire to act responsibly in a changing society” (2008-2009 NJ School Report Card).

Donna decided early in life that she wanted to become a special education teacher after having done an independent study at a special needs school while in high school. In college, she worked at a camp for children with severe disabilities. She stated, “Working with really disabled kids was something I found such a joy in” (Donna, personal communication, April 29, 2010). Donna spent her 33-year career as a special education teacher at the same high school. Her assignment at the time of the interview included working as an in-class support teacher in three classes, and a resource Algebra 1 teacher. She was highly qualified in the four core content subjects: math, English, social studies, and science. Donna shared that she no longer had the same passion for teaching:

When I got here to teach special ed at the high school, little by little, my view of special ed waned . . . . I’m frustrated with it, I am resentful of it, that I have to teach a bunch of kids who don’t have major learning problems…. We make
excuses and we allow… and that’s what was so different from… special education in 1977 when I graduated college, to now 2010. It completely turned around. (Donna, personal communication, April 29, 2010).

Valley High School served 891 students in grades 9-12 during the 2008-2009 school year. 11.1% of those students were classified as “Special Education” (2008-2009 NJ School Report Card). Jack was employed at Valley High School, where they are “implementing a small learning communities designed to motivate students” (2008-2009 NJ School Report Card).

Jack began his career working with disabled adults as an administrator at the Arc of Somerset. He wanted to expand his horizons to work with a younger population. He enrolled in a Special Education program and obtained certification and a Masters degree. He has been certified for eight years, and employed at his present school the same amount of time. Jack is highly qualified at the high school level in History. He is currently assigned as an in-class support teacher in the History department. Jack believes “it’s a benefit to always have two teachers in a classroom… you have two teachers, it ultimately benefits the students” (Jack, personal communication, May 19, 2010).

In addition to history-related training seminars, Jack’s professional development included “a lot in special ed, differentiated instruction- which helps with History, because the History teachers do not have a lot of special ed training” (Jack, personal communication, May 19, 2010). He had also run faculty-training workshops at his school to train general education teachers on how educate special education students. At the time of the interview, Jack was scheduled to complete training in U.S. History at Princeton University over three summers from 2010 to 2012. Jack believed that “if you
have your graduate degree and you’re a good teacher—whether you’re highly qualified or not—if you’re a good teacher, you can teach anything” (Jack, personal communication, May 19, 2010).

Eastman High School, located in a suburban community, boasted that “Newsweek magazine ranked them among the top 4% of the U.S. public schools, and NJ Monthly magazine ranked them among the top 30 public high schools in the state”. During the 2008-2009 school year, Eastman reported 1784 students, 15.4% listed as “Special Education” (2008-2009 School Report Card).

Mary had been a special education teacher for 16 years, having been at Eastman for 11 years. She described her experience as a high school teacher as “a self-taught, observation type of experience” (Mary, personal communication, June 1, 2010). She has been at her present school for 11 years. Mary was assigned to do in-class support in Biology and Physics, a replacement class in Earth Science, and a supplemental class called “Academic Lab” at the time of her interview. Mary was highly qualified in science. She has attended the N.J. Science Convention, as well as “any kind of extra seminars or workshops that are available to [me]” (Mary, personal communication, June 1, 2010). She was seeking to become highly qualified in History.

Rosemont High School was located in a suburban/urban community serving grades 8-12. Sheila and Caren were employed at Rosemont, which is Year 7, “In Need of Improvement” status, according to NCLB (2008-2009 School Report Card). 16% of the 1050.5 students were classified as “Special Education” during the 2008-2009 school year.

Sheila referred to herself as a “student with a disability” (Sheila, personal communication, October 18, 2010). She had been certified as a special education teacher
Sheila stated, “Just really, my whole basis for special ed is personal- personal experience from being ‘one of them’.” She believed that placing students in inclusion classes makes them feel “like ‘less special ed’. The stigma is kind of taken away because now they have a quote/unquote ‘regular teacher’ teaching them, instead of a special ed teacher” (Sheila, personal communication, October 18, 2010).

Caren had been a special education teacher for 13 years. She had earned a Bachelor’s degree in Music, but returned to school to pursue a dual Masters in Special Education and Reading after having worked at a summer camp for children with emotional disabilities. Caren had been employed at the school for five years. She was assigned to 8th grade students as a Resource English and Resource Reading teacher, as well as an inclusion teacher in social studies at the time of the interview. Caren was highly qualified in Language Arts Literacy K-12. She pointed out that her highly qualified status affected her job assignment: “That’s the reason I’m all 8th grade . . . They needed someone, really, who was highly qualified to teach English and reading” (Caren, personal communication, October 18, 2010).
Dogwood High School, the smallest of the participating schools, reported a student population of 685, which included the middle school and high school housed in one building. Dogwood participated in a send-receive relationship with approximately 50 high school students from a neighboring district. Dogwood was also a “County Interdistrict Public School Choice” school, accommodating 105 from eight surrounding communities (2008-2009 NJ School Report Card).

Nick was employed at Dogwood High School. He came from a “family of educators”; both his father and mother were teachers. He expressed that his desire to teach came from that background: “I always had a lot of inspiration, and I learned a lot from them, I had a lot of background” (Nick, personal communication, October 20, 2010). Nick has been a certified special education teacher for seven years; he returned to school to study education after obtaining a Bachelor’s degree in Communications. He was pursuing a Masters in Administration at the time of the interview.

Nick was assigned to six teaching periods: two sections of senior and one section of junior English, which he categorized as “self-contained”; and in-class support in Earth Science, Chemistry, and U.S. History 1. He was highly qualified in English and was involved in Professional Learning Communities (PLC) related to English at his school. Nick shared his reason for going into Special Education:

I always enjoyed working with children, and when I started substituting, I found it very rewarding…. Most of the time I substituted with… for autistic children and children with learning disabilities rather than regular ed, and I found it to be a lot more rewarding (Nick, personal communication, October 20, 2010).
Procedures

In the spring semester of the 2009-2010 school year, Directors or Supervisors of Special Education from 33 school districts in four counties in New Jersey were contacted via U.S. Mail to ask permission to interview special education teachers at the high school level. The addresses were obtained from the NJ Department of Education website. The packets included a cover letter briefly explaining the study and a copy of the Consent Form.

Most Districts did not respond; one initially responded negatively. A few Directors/Supervisors responded that they would pass the information along and contact the researcher if and when a teacher was available. After a 3-4 week period, the Special Education Directors/Supervisors were contacted for a follow-up via email. During the hiatus, corrections to names and addresses were made. One Director responded with a rather harsh denial.

At the beginning of the 2010-2011 school year, 12 school districts were contacted either again or for the first time. Those letters were sent directly to the principals of the high schools. Two schools responded; one school provided one teacher, while the other forwarded the information to the Director of Special Education. After a lengthy discussion with her two teachers were made available.

The nine teachers designated the times and locations of the interviews. After obtaining their consent forms, a brief description of procedure was outlined. A tape recorder was used during each interview, along with notes taken on the protocol. The recorder shut off during one interview; the notes from that session were extensive enough to be included in the findings. At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were
provided with information about the purpose of the study and the motivation of the researcher. Each interview was then transcribed for use during data analysis.

Data Analysis

Through analysis of the participants’ responses, the meaning of teachers’ experiences with the “Highly Qualified Teacher” mandate of NCLB has been determined. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend the creation of a “provisional ‘start list’ of codes” before beginning fieldwork. The codes for this study are listed in Table B1.

LeCompte (2000) suggested sifting through data by repeated readings through interview transcription notes to reveal frequency of data items (p. 148). Preliminary categories taken from the repeated readings and comparison of the teachers’ responses include professional experience and highly qualified (see Table B2).

The initial codes- certification process and educational background- outline why the participants chose Special Education, what was required of them as students, and what courses were taken to meet their goals. They also include additional activities that enhance their experiences as special education teachers. The teachers’ discussions of their backgrounds and coursework, compared and contrasted how the participants became involved with special education, the number of years they have worked in the field, and their perceptions of their educational experiences were analyzed. The teachers’ ideas about what background and preparation are important for an effective special education teacher were also examined. Themes and patterns arose that revealed these teachers’ perspectives of their academic knowledge and experience in relation to being qualified to do their jobs.
In the second set of interviews, the participants were asked to discuss their present employment and status as special education teachers. Analysis of responses to this set of questions focused more on the creation of categories than creating a descriptive narrative (Seidman 1998). Codes emerged from participants’ discussions of the questions.

The third set of interview questions delve into the experiences of the special education teachers participating in the study, asking them to focus on their perceptions of the “Highly Qualified Teacher” mandate. Codes for this section were created to describe the experiences, as well as perceptions and ideas about their job placements and security, and effect on teachers and students.

Step four of analysis, as outlined by LeCompte (2000) discussed the creation of patterns- noticing how sets of data group together to create meaning. The research looks for characteristics such as similarity, co-occurrence, or sequence (pp. 150-151). The participants’ responses were examined and coded for the frequency of discussion of experiences, students’ needs, and description of perceptions about the “Highly Qualified Teacher” mandate. They were then related to the research questions and reexamined for the similarity of the teachers’ experiences and perceptions, as well as whether the teachers experienced the “Highly Qualified Teacher” mandate in similar ways. The meaning derived from the participants’ experiences will be discussed.

**Validity and Reliability**

**Role of the Researcher**

Creswell (1998, p. 235) defines bracketing (epoche) as the point where the “researcher sets aside, as far as is humanly possible, all preconceived experiences to best
understand the experiences of the participants in the study.” To effectively execute this study, I first needed to address my own experiences as a special education teacher who was also affected by NCLB during the epoche phase of the study.

As a special education teacher, I too have been affected by the “Highly Qualified Teacher” mandate. I am considered “highly qualified” in two of the core content areas- English and Social Studies. Although I am a doctoral candidate with a Masters degree, and have been certified and teaching in both self-contained and in-class support settings since 1996, I do not have the ‘proper’ credits nor adequate HOUSSE points to be considered highly qualified to teach math and science courses at the high school level. When I was assigned to teach those subjects before the mandate, I spent many hours of preparation and attended professional development sessions that did not count, according to the mandate.

Marshall & Rossman (1999, pp. 28-29) suggested that the researcher’s challenge is to demonstrate that personal interest will not bias his or her study. I attempted to put aside my personal biases and consider the information shared by the participants in the interviews, after having bracketed my own experiences through the process of epoche (Creswell, 1998, pp. 54-55). At times, however, I felt that it was important to let the participants know that I am more than just a researcher; I am also a special education teacher. I added comments or clarified questions through my own experiences, where appropriate.

Marshall & Rossman (1999) warn that failure to build trust with the participants can compromise the quality of the information shared. They advise that the researcher needs to be “an active, patient, and thoughtful listener… having an empathetic
understanding of and a profound respect for the perspectives of others” (p. 85). During the nine interviews, my rapport with the participants varied. Four participants appeared to be very comfortable with this researcher; they shared more than enough information. With these teachers, my role as researcher involved regulating the conversation to remain on topic. Two of the teachers, however, seemed to be concerned with the length of the interviews and although they were cooperative, their answers were to the point without much extraneous dialog. The remaining participants were forthcoming with information and appeared at ease.

Verification

Creswell and Miller (2000) define validity as “how accurately the account represents the participants’ realities of the social phenomenon and is credible to them” (pp. 124-125). They described the participants’ “lens” (viewpoint) captured by the researcher as “the perceptions of socially constructed reality represented accurately” (p.125). To establish credibility, Creswell and Miller recommend the use of rich, thick description to “describe the participants, and the themes of a qualitative study . . . statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced or could experience the events being described in a study” (pp. 128-129).

The data in this study was presented to give the reader a sense of where the participants came from academically and professionally. The descriptions also incuded dicussion of the teachers’ perceptions about job security and the effect of HQTon special educators and students. The findings have been divided into discussions of the research questions.
Creswell and Miller (2000) described the practice of using an “audit trail” to establish the credibility of a study: “The credibility of a study is established by turning to individuals external to the project, such as auditors . . . to examine both the process and product of the inquiry, and determine the trustworthiness of the findings” (p.128). Three auditors were given copies of the nine transcriptions, along with the findings of the study. Each was asked to attest to the accuracy with which the participants were portrayed.

The first auditor stated that “the document helps to understand the importance of preparation/certification . . . a valuable contribution to the area of Special Education”, pointing to a few additional quotes that he felt would enhance the findings (personal communication, January 2011). The second asked for clarification in a couple of areas, and offered suggestions that have been incorporated into the findings. A conversation with the third, who is certified in Special Education, revealed that the information has been presented in an understandable manner. He also offered suggestions about the placement of certain quotes.

**Limitations**

Marshall and Rossman (1999) describe limitations as a reminder of “what the study is and is not” (p. 43). They state that although no qualitative study is statistically generalizable, the “findings may be transferable” and the reader “can make decisions about the usefulness for other settings” (pp. 42-43). This study was limited to a small number of teachers in New Jersey. The participants were primarily from one county within the state, which further limits the sample.
The federal government has left the responsibility of creating standards to measure teacher quality to the individual states (Boehner, 2002). Tracy and Walsh (2004) pointed out the inconsistency of the law; states have created loopholes and have different standards. They pointed out that “with a few exceptions, states have shown insufficient willingness to create clear, rigorous, and relevant standards for identifying high quality teachers” (p. 12). Although this could effect the generalizability, this study attempted to present the experiences of the New Jersey special education teachers to special educators in other states so they will identify with them.
Results

Research Questions Answered

This study examined the experiences of special education teachers with NCLB “Highly Qualified Teacher” mandate. The questions were designed to capture the essence of the special education teachers’ perceptions of the mandate and its affect on teachers and their students. The study asks the following questions:

• What steps have these teachers taken to become “highly qualified”, and what challenges, if any, did they face in the process?
• How has the school district adapted programs to accommodate the changes in qualifications of the Special Education teachers?
• How do the teachers perceive these changes, if any, have affected the children they have been assigned to teach?

Question #1: Steps Taken to Become “Highly Qualified”: Successes and Challenges

The teachers in this study had achieved “highly qualified” status through various methods. Five demonstrated their qualifications through the HOUSSE system—a combination of points taken from college credits, professional development, and experience. Four had passed Praxis tests, while two of the teachers had been certified through coursework. All but one of the participants of this study was “highly qualified” in one or more core content subjects at the high school level.

Donna felt that the HOUSSE process was “easy” because of her experience. Four- Liz, Sheila, Caren and Nick- have passed Praxis tests to become certified. Liz and Betty have been certified in English and Math respectively through coursework. None of them felt that they faced any challenges. Liz stated, “Because of all the coursework I did,
they just looked at everything; so . . . I guess it benefited me a lot” (personal communication, April 21, 2010). Caren also did not believe that she was affected:

I don’t think it has really affected me because I was already highly qualified, I mean I didn’t have to really get all stressed out, and try to figure out if I have to do the matrix, or do I have to take more classes, because I knew I was already qualified (personal communication, October 18, 2010).

Betty also shared, “Highly Qualified was easy. I already had certification, so I didn’t even have to do the matrix” (personal communication, April 22, 2010).

When asked about the challenges she and other special educators faced, Sheila pointed out that there were some teachers who were challenged by the “highly qualified” process:

I hate to say it- unprofessional ones- they were kind of hoping to continue to slip through the cracks. And now it’s starting to come around and bite them; and they’re trying to make every excuse in the book” (personal communication, October 18, 2010).

The participants in this study had very diverse educational backgrounds. Although they have all found careers as special education teachers, they arrived at their positions from different paths. Only two, Donna and Mary, majored in Special Education at the undergraduate level. However, all nine teachers shared similar information about the coursework they completed to obtain their Special Ed certification. They all had taken a combination of methods and content-based courses.

Special Education content courses varied for the participants. Betty pointed out that she took “lots of education courses about special needs” (personal communication,
April 22, 2010), Donna mentioned pedagogy and theory courses. Caren also stated, “The special ed were not all content-based. They were all methods and theory” (personal communication, October 18, 2010). Jack had to complete 30 credits in Special Education: “courses that dealt with developmental disabilities, learning styles . . .” (personal communication, May 19, 2010). Mary shared that her coursework “varied tremendously, which is a problem because you don’t specialize in a particular area.” She later added:

I remember just being confused about what I wanted to do in college, and not knowing- I mean, there wasn’t a specific area- I should have ideally had a minor in a specific subject area, which would have been helpful (Mary, personal communication, June 1, 2010).

Those teachers who had taken content-related courses described general curricula that did not fully prepare them to teach specific subjects. Betty mentioned a course named “Teaching Content Areas”, in which she had to create English, reading and science unit plans. Liz was required to take two courses per content area, at both the elementary and secondary levels. Donna named a “Math and Reading Concepts” course. Only Jessica, who admitted that she was trying to make herself “more marketable”, took a concentration of English courses.

Psychology courses were also a part of the teachers’ Special Education training. Jessica named Behavioral Psychology and Applied Behavioral Analysis among the courses she had taken. Jack included psychology courses in his 30 credits. Sheila recalled, “For the Special Education, it was a mixture of Psychology, as well as Methods” (personal communication, October 18, 2010).
The nine special education teachers who participated in this study had all been certified for more than seven years. The number of years they had been at their present schools ranged from two to 33 years. All but two of the teachers had been assigned to co-teach in in-class support settings, along with resource/replacement classes. Betty and Sheila exclusively taught resource classes.

**Question #2: School District Adaptations to Accommodate Changes**

The teachers were asked to discuss whether or not their highly qualified status, and the qualifications of their colleagues affected programming within their schools. According to the participants, a few of the schools had implemented the in-class support model to accommodate the qualifications of the teachers. Betty pointed out that in her school, they have “people who are not highly qualified in subject areas- they are in-class support” (personal communication, April 22, 2010). Jack related similar information: “People who are not content-certified will do all in-class support, unless there’s a special resource program” (personal communication, May 19, 2010).

Jessica also reflected on the practice: “Like with in-class support, you can still be put in any subject in our high school…. In an in-class support, even if you’re not highly qualified, you can still act as the co-teacher” (personal communication, April 28, 2010). Mary was unsure, but stated, “I think they’ll put you in all in-class support classes… you won’t teach a specific class” (personal communication, June 1, 2010).

The school in which Liz and Betty taught aligned the in-class and resource classes. Liz shared, “I co-teach one junior level English class, one freshman level class… and then I have… resource room classes- my own classes- one freshman English, one junior English” (personal communication, April 21, 2010). Betty observed, “It seems
like the people in resource who have junior English are also in in-class junior English… If you’re teaching Algebra in the resource, you are also teaching in-class support Algebra” (personal communication, April 22, 2010).

Special Education teachers who have limited or not highly qualified status have been relegated to teaching courses for special education students outside of the core content areas. Liz was assigned to the Academic Strategies course at Municipal High School. She referred to it as “actually a five-credit course… it’s like study skills, but we have to actually do lessons” (personal communication, April 21, 2010). Betty pointed out, “We do have people who are not highly qualified in subject areas… we have a class called ‘Academic Strategies’ which is… support, study skills, whatever you want to call it… and you don’t have to be highly qualified” (personal communication, April 22, 2010).

Mary taught a supplemental class at Eastman called “Academic Lab”, which offered special education students organizational skills, opportunities to study, and a place to complete tests if extra time was needed. Jack stated that during the 2010-2011 school year, he would be teaching “a new course [at Valley High] that has to do with transition of special education students, and study skills, so it goes back to Special Education content” (personal communication, May 19, 2010).

The State of New Jersey had taken over programming at Sheila and Caren’s school. The Special Education teachers had to assume the role of in-class support throughout Rosemont high School. Sheila explained:

With the involvement of the state this year, this school and district has just been informed that the majority of the Special Education Department is not actually
highly qualified in any content area. So this year we have a lot of regular ed
teachers teaching resource room subjects… with a special education teacher in
there. So the regular ed teacher delivering the content, with the special education
teacher doing any necessary modifications (Sheila, personal communication,
October 18, 2010).

The teachers also weighed in on the impact in-class support classes have on their
positions. Liz simply stated, “It’s hard co-teaching all day” (personal communication,
April 22, 2010). Sheila pointed out that sometimes the students didn’t understand her
role in the room; they asked her if she was an aide in the classroom. She explained that
she was a teacher, and that the two teachers did different things in the class. Sheila
shared:

I’ve been blessed to work with some phenomenal teachers who will turn around
and tell the kids, “She’s got more teaching certifications than I do…. So I’ve been
fortunate to work with all the regular/special ed and really had no issues with it.”
(Sheila, personal communication, April 22, 2010).

In addition, Jack asserted, “I don’t think there should be a disparity… I don’t believe you
can really differentiate and say one is really better than the other” (personal
communication, May 19, 2010).

When asked to discuss how they felt the highly qualified process affected their
job assignments, the participants felt that their status was beneficial to them as teachers.
Betty expressed how the “highly qualified teacher” mandate has affected her: “So wait- I
can only teach math? Fantastic… It made me feel secure in the fact that I could only
teach things in that I was qualified, and confident and know really well” (personal communication, April 22, 2010).

Liz recognized her value as a “highly qualified teacher”: “My supervisor said to me, ‘Liz, you are so easy to place in any situation because you do have the English, science and math.’” (personal communication, April 21, 2010). Jessica reflected, “Well, it’s kind of worked out nice for me in a way, because I enjoy teaching English, and because I’m highly qualified” (personal communication, April 28, 2010).

A couple of the teachers did not feel they were affected by the “highly qualified” mandate, therefore they did not feel their job security was called into question. Mary said, “It’s a positive aspect because I’m only in the science area, which is helpful to me, because then I don’t have to be teaching something I’m not familiar with . . . it hasn’t really affected me at all” (personal communication, June 1, 2010).

Nick also felt he hadn’t been affected:

It has not affected my job assignment at all. Being that I’m already highly qualified, and familiar with the content, and I have many years’ experience, and I have a passion for literature and writing and reading… it has not affected me at all (personal communication, October 20, 2010).

Only one teacher, Sheila, felt that the HQT mandate has affected her negatively: “It hinders me from doing, from teaching high school-level math. And it has basically also added more prep classes for me” (personal communication, October 18, 2010).
Question #3: Perceptions of the “Highly Qualified Teacher” Mandate

The participants were asked to reflect upon their experiences with having to be considered “highly qualified”, based on the amount of educational preparation and professional development they have undergone. All of them agree that it is important to be highly qualified, but they had varying opinions about the process. Their reactions ranged from understanding the need for such a mandate, to feeling that highly qualified status does not create a good teacher. Liz stated:

We have to qualify, and really, I don’t think we have to be that high… because a lot of these kids are nowhere near that. Some of them can’t even get past fourth grade in writing. So why do we have to be at such a high level? (personal communication, April 21, 2010).

Betty believed that the HQT requirement will not remain in effect: “Well, I would imagine it’s going to phase out . . . because people are going to have to be certified in a discipline . . . eventually that will have to change” (personal communication, April 22, 2010).

Jessica understood the necessity, but did not completely agree with the procedure: I think if you’re going to teach a subject, you should have a certain level of content knowledge about it… But it just seems a little, um… I guess it’s to cover bases and show that these teachers are qualified, but it’s an ‘after the fact’ kind of thing. Maybe going forward I can see its validity, but going back for teachers who have already been teaching, it just seems a little silly. I mean, if they’ve been effective, and they’re knowledgeable…..” (personal communication, April 28, 2010).
Caren did not believe that HQT status creates an effective teacher:

It’s nice to know they feel I’m qualified, but there are really good teachers who aren’t qualified even though they’re excellent teachers, so I’m not exactly sure how that paperwork really matters…. I feel like sometimes people can be qualified, but they might not know how to teach even though they have all the credentials to be able to teach… so “highly qualified” is not necessarily going to change that (Caren, personal communication, October 18, 2010).

Nick, however, believed that HQT is an effective indicator:

I think it’s great because I think that a teacher who is teaching a particular content subject such as math, social studies, or English should be highly qualified in the particular subject. And I think that the process that they created to become highly qualified was easy enough . . . . So I think the process is good. (Nick, personal communication, October 20, 2010).

When asked how they felt the HQTs mandate has affected special education teachers in general, the participants reflected upon the process, it’s impact on job assignments, and the reaction of some teachers. Sheila and Nick believed that teachers who were prepared were not affected. Sheila said, “Professional ones- ones who are aware of what their responsibilities are- I don’t think it’s affected them at all” (personal communication, October 18, 2010). Nick’s assertion that “everyone did what they had to do to become highly qualified” in his school echoed that sentiment (personal communication, October 20, 2010).

Betty referred to seasoned teachers: “People with Masters degrees, and two Masters degrees . . . that was frustrating for people” (personal communication, April 22,
2010). In contrast, Mary pointed out “the pressure on younger ones with testing- unless they have a minor in the particular subject- but you never know what jobs are opening” (personal communication, June 1, 2010). Donna believed that the “highly qualified” mandate forced teachers to “step up and hone their skills (personal communication, April 29, 2010).

Jack and Sheila both felt that the process was not equitable for special education teachers. Jack asserted:

What I would like to see happen, is that the Federal government is mandating that you need to be highly qualified in your core content subject, and they need to make it mandatory for that General education teacher to be highly qualified in Special ed as well. That’s what I’d like to see happen. Will that happen? I’m sure it won’t, but you know… (Jack, personal communication, May 19, 2010).

Sheila offered a similar opinion:

I do have an issue with the fact that general education teachers are not required to- at least in the state of NJ- are not required to take a certain amount of special education classes. So here I am basically having two degrees, or two certifications when the general education teachers are responsible for quote-unquote- “their students”. But yet I’m responsible for theirs and mine. So I’m still having a hard time understanding that one (Sheila, personal communication, October 18, 2010).

Taught by “Highly Qualified” Teachers: The Perceived Effect on the Students.

Some of the educators in this study believe that having a highly qualified teacher had benefited the students they had been assigned to teach. Donna called it a “positive
impact” because it “raised the bar” (personal communication, April 29, 2010). Mary stated, “It’s a positive aspect because then their teacher will be more knowledgeable in their subject area” (personal communication, June 1, 2010).

I think it’s a benefit to have them at the secondary level…. Secondary teachers are really about their subject matter…. And it gives kids experts in their subject matter, or certainly people more highly qualified in that subject matter. (Betty, personal communication, April 22, 2010).

However, Jessica expressed the opinion that the HQT mandate has not made a difference for students: “I don’t know if it did . . . . I haven’t witnessed anything that would indicate that these kids are so much better off now that they’re with a highly qualified teacher” (Jessica, personal communication, April 28, 2010). Donna asserted, “NCLB has failed the lower functioning students” (personal communication, April 29, 2010).

The teachers discussed the institution of in-class support classes and, in some instances, the impact it had on the students; their opinions varied from stating the value to finding it to be a negative influence. Caren stated, “They’re really struggling, because there hasn’t been a lot of training on that” (personal communication, October 18, 2010). However, Sheila believed, “If anything, I would say it kind of felt like ‘less special ed’. The stigma is kind of taken away because now they have a ‘regular teacher’ teaching them, instead of a special ed teacher” (personal communication, October 18, 2010).

Liz, Jack, and Nick offered contrasting opinions:

You can’t take that student who can’t read- you can’t take that student who can’t write and put them in a regular ed classroom. There’s no way, there’s no way
that they can keep up with the amount of writing and everything…. A parent says that their kid goes into regular ed and I can tell you right now that their kid does horrible because they just can’t keep up with the pace” (Liz, personal communication, April 21, 2010).

Both Jack and Nick highlighted the importance of meeting the needs of students by addressing their specific concerns:

I think that there are certain students who can handle it, and unfortunately others who can’t- who are behaviorally challenged…. I do believe there are situations where a student does need to be in a resource room, or different setting than the traditional classroom setting. Because there are some students who don’t have the academic. mental, or behavioral, emotional, or medical capacity to be able to be in a regular classroom (Jack, personal communication, May 19, 2010).

Nick affirmed:

I honestly believe that it’s been beneficial for them, to interact with other children- “regular ed children”. I think it’s to their benefit because they can become more mature, they don’t become as dependent, they want to focus more, they want to succeed more. And they don’t want to be the outcasts, so when you mix them in with the regular ed population in the in-class support classroom, I think it benefits them in all ways (personal communication, October 20, 2010).

The special education teachers interviewed openly shared their thoughts and opinions about the HQT process. Although they did not agree about its necessity, effectiveness and purpose, their collective experiences have provided insight into the perception of HQT and its effect on special educators and the students they teach.
Discussion

This phenomenological study was designed to examine the experiences of special education teachers with the “Highly Qualified Teacher” mandate of NCLB, and to allow them a “voice” on the subject. The teachers shared their perceptions of the law, and expressed their thoughts about the process. The themes that emerged from the reflections of the teachers focused on how their placements in their schools were affected by the mandate, in light of their experience and experience, as well as how their students have been affected.

The nine special education teachers in this study obtained their “highly qualified” status through a variety of means. As the literature indicates, a highly qualified teacher holds a Bachelor’s degree, full state certification, and is able to demonstrate content knowledge in every subject he or she teaches (Boehner, 2004). The participants in this study have all fulfilled these criteria: five through the HOUSSE method, three from passing the Praxis tests and one through certification. There was an average of 14 years experience among them.

Boyer and Mainzer (2003) noted the “commitment to continued learning” of special education teachers, referring to 1995 data that reported that more special education teachers hold Master’s degrees than do general education teachers. Of these with Master’s degrees, 12% were working on additional degrees (p. 9). Six of the participants in this study hold Master’s degrees, and one was working toward the degree. One teacher, Liz, reflected on having “enough credits to have a PhD by now” (personal communication, April 21, 2010).
Rotherdam and Mead (2003), and Tracy and Walsh (2004) discussed the emphasis on pedagogy given to the training of special education teachers. When asked about their training, the participants felt that they had received a combination of methods and content area courses, as well as psychology classes. Tracy and Walsh (2003) also pointed out a U.S. Department of Education statistic stating that nearly 94% of certified special education teachers did not have a college major in their assigned subjects. Seven of the participants had not majored in their assigned areas. All had attended professional development workshops and in-services that enhanced their pedagogical skills, while only four had attended professional development that related to subject area.

In addition to their rich and varied educational backgrounds, the participants of this study have acquired valuable life experiences and taken advantage of various professional development opportunities to prepare them for their positions as special education teachers. Their perceptions of HQT have been an essential part of this study.

The nine special educators in this study discussed how they felt the “highly qualified teacher” mandate affected them professionally, and more specifically, their job assignments. All but one believed that content knowledge is important; Betty felt that it is beneficial to the students, while Mary stated that it should have been done a long time ago. Jack, however, didn’t believe in the process, sharing that being a good teacher does not necessarily correspond with meeting HQT requirements. Caren shared a similar sentiment: “I feel like sometimes people can be qualified, but they might not know how to teach even though they have all the credentials to be able to teach… but I feel like people should at least have the knowledge” (Caren, personal communication, October 18,
Corrigan et al. (2010). For the most part, the participants of this study did not feel that the HQT process affected their job assignments.

The 2006 survey study conducted by Smith (2006) revealed that special education teachers in Maricopa County, Arizona felt that the “highly qualified teacher” mandate was “unreasonable”; they felt that the mandate would negatively affect finding competent teachers who enjoy teaching. The New Jersey special educators in this study did not feel that the mandate has affected them as professionals.

This study asked whether the participants’ school districts adapted programs to accommodate the “highly qualified” status of their teachers. Five of the nine responded that there have been program changes within their school, while the others reported that there hadn’t been changes. Donna simply replied, “No, the teachers adjust” (personal communication, April 29, 2010).

Quigney (2009) pointed to the fact that special education teachers who are not highly qualified have been assigned to in-class instruction. Although all but one of the participants in this study is highly qualified, they were all able to speak to the issue within their respective school districts. Seven of the eight teachers, despite their highly qualified status, have been assigned to in-class support classes.

Research has shown that special education teachers who have assumed co-teaching positions at the secondary level are often perceived in lesser roles than their general education counterparts. The participants of this study expressed their opinions on this topic; Jack and Sheila expressed the need for HQT status in special education for genera education teachers. Some of the teachers also believed that in-class support has not positively affected the students. They discussed how some students with special
needs are struggling in general education classes. Nick and Sheila, however, believed that integration into general education classes are beneficial in that it allows students to feel more “normal”.

The participants in this study shared different perceptions of the “highly qualified teacher” process. Most felt that it is necessary that teachers who are competent and knowledgeable should teach students. However, while the teachers generally agreed that both regular and special education teachers should be equipped with the skills necessary to service all students, some feel that the “highly qualified teacher ” label does not necessarily make a good teacher, and not all felt that having HQT status would benefit the students. Shelia believed that the students “just kind of go with the flow” (personal communication, October 18, 2010), while Liz and Jack did not believe that placing all students in traditional classroom settings was always beneficial.

Policymakers need to recognize the knowledge and skill involved in working with special needs students, along with content knowledge. The “Highly Qualified Special Education Teacher” should be recognized as valuable for the knowledge of disabilities, teaching strategies and behavioral techniques. Jack and Sheila expressed the need for general education teachers to be “highly qualified” in special education. Therefore, NCLB must recognize the importance of the special needs of students with disabilities, and clearly address this issue. The comments and ideas of the teachers in this study also point to the notion that colleges and universities need to continue to provide programs that will better prepare prospective teachers to meet the needs of all students.

This study was limited to the thoughts opinions of nine teachers from seven school districts in two counties in New Jersey; therefore it is difficult to generalize their
perceptions to all teachers. However, their perceptions of NCLB HQT may be those that educators may be able to identify with. To broaden the scope of perspective of teachers in New Jersey, future research would need to include teachers from each of the 21 counties in New Jersey. Perhaps further research could include a nationwide study sampling the perceptions of educators across the country, taking in to account the inconsistency of implementation among the states. The question of whether or not HQT has affected special education students was raised during this study. An interesting area of exploration would include examining the effects the changes HQT has caused for the students.

The “highly qualified teacher” aspect of NCLB has been a necessary revision to education law, but it has been a controversial subject that has caused much debate in many areas of education.
References


Appendix A
Interview Protocol

Interview #1: “Focused Life History”

1. How long have you been certified as a special education teacher?
2. How did you become a special education teacher?
3. How many years did it take you to become certified as a New Jersey “Teacher of Students with Disabilities”?
4. Was “Special Education” your major?
5. What classes did you take to prepare you for what you wanted to do? More specifically, was your course load arranged with an emphasis on context or teaching methods?
6. Did you do any extracurricular activities that you fell prepared you for teaching special education?

Interview #2: “The Details of Experience”

1. How long have you been at your present school?
2. Describe your present assignment at your school.
3. In how many core content subjects are you considered “highly qualified”?
4. How did you become “highly qualified” in these subjects?
5. Describe any professional development that you have undergone to help you further your knowledge of the subjects you teach.
6. Has your school had to adjust programs to accommodate the qualifications of the teachers in your department?
Interview #3: “Reflection of the Meaning”

1. How has the “highly qualified” process affected your job assignment at your school?

2. How has the process affected you professionally?

3. What are your perceptions of the “highly qualified” process, in light of your own educational preparation and professional development?

4. Overall, how do you think the “highly qualified” mandate has affected special education teachers?

5. How do you think it has affected the students who receive special education services?
Appendix B

Table 1

Start List of Codes and Definitions

| CERTIFICATION PROCESS: the steps taken for the teachers to become certified Special Education Teachers in New Jersey |
| CP: YEARS CERTIFIED (CP-YC) | number of years as a certified special education teacher |
| CP: INTEREST (CP-INT) | how the teachers became involved in special education |
| CP: DURATION OF PROCESS (CP-DP) | number of years to obtain certification |

| EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND: courses taken toward degree(s) |
| EB: ORIGINAL MAJOR (EB-OM) | discussion of goals and educational interests |
| EB: COURSE LOAD (EB-CL) | classes taken toward degree |
| - content (EB-CLC) | classes with emphasis on subject area |
| - teaching methods (EB-CLTM) | classes with emphasis on special classroom management and techniques |
| - classes (EB-CLCL) | detailed descriptions of courses taken |
| EB: EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES (EB-EA) | experience beyond classroom education |

<p>| PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: special education classes that teachers have been assigned to teach |
| PE: PRESENT ASSIGNMENT (PE-PA) | description of teachers’ special education teaching assignments |
| - length of time (PE-PALT) | number of years at place of employment |
| - course assignment (PE-PACA) | classes to which teachers have been assigned |</p>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Code</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PE: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (PE-PD)</td>
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<td>steps taken by teachers in addition to academic coursework to enhance their knowledge of the content material</td>
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<td>- workshops</td>
<td>(PE-PDW)</td>
<td>workshops and in-services attended</td>
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<tr>
<td>- collaboration</td>
<td>(PE-PDC)</td>
<td>working with general education teachers to further knowledge of subject area classes taken beyond degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- academic</td>
<td>(PE-PDA)</td>
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**HIGHLY QUALIFIED**: having met the NJ Department of Education requirements for teaching specific content areas

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<tr>
<td>HQ: CONTENT AREAS (HQ-CA)</td>
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<td>which areas the teachers are “highly qualified” (HQ) to teach</td>
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<tr>
<td>HQ: PROCESS (HQ-PR)</td>
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<td>steps taken to become HQ in the content areas they are assigned to teach</td>
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<tr>
<td>- academic</td>
<td>(HQ-PRA)</td>
<td>HQ gained through coursework</td>
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<tr>
<td>- experience</td>
<td>(HQ-PRE)</td>
<td>HQ gained through years of experience in the subject area</td>
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**SCHOOL PROGRAMMING**: the effect HQT had on class assignments within schools

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<td>SP: PROGRAM ADJUSTMENTS (SP-PA)</td>
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<td>whether schools have changed course offerings based on HQT</td>
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<td>SP: JOB ASSIGNMENTS (SP-JA)</td>
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<td>whether teachers’ placements were affected by HQT</td>
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**TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS**: how teachers perceive the HQT and it’s effects

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<td>teachers’ perceptions of how they were affected professionally</td>
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<tr>
<td>TP: OVERVIEW (TP-OV)</td>
<td></td>
<td>teachers’ thoughts of the HQT process</td>
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<tr>
<td>TP: EFFECT ON TEACHERS (TP-ET)</td>
<td></td>
<td>teachers’ perceptions of affect on special education teachers</td>
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TP: EFFECT ON STUDENTS (TP-ES)  teachers’ perceptions of affect on students
TP: IN-CLASS SUPPORT (TP-IS)  teachers’ perceptions of ICS affect on students

Table 2

Preliminary Categories “Details of Experience”

• In-class support/co-teaching: teaching assignments in which the special educators are paired with general education teachers to instruct inclusion classes.

• Content knowledge: whether or not the teachers are considered “highly qualified” in the areas they are assigned to teach; discussions about how they familiarize themselves with the content for these classes.

• Students’ needs: what the teachers feel is important to help their students be successful within their classes.

• Education: additional coursework or professional development taken to further teachers’ knowledge in the content areas to which they were assigned.

• Professional development: workshops and seminars that teachers have attended to further knowledge in a specific area of education