



Fostering Preservice Teachers' Development: Engagement in Practice and Learning

Sarah K. McMahan
Texas Woman's University

Rubén Garza
Texas State University

Abstract:

Given the benefits associated with authentic field experiences (Edwards, 1996; McMahan et al., 2015; Siwatu, 2010), it is not uncommon to include early field experiences prior to student teaching as a way to engage university students with teaching diverse students in an authentic school setting. This study explored preservice teachers' perceptions of their pedagogical growth and development as an aspiring teacher in a structured field experience placement prior to student teaching. Data was analyzed using qualitative techniques and revealed three main themes. The following themes reflected preservice teachers' perceptions of their growth: viewing through a prescriptive lens, valuing the collaborative experience, and fostering self-awareness. While preservice teachers valued the collaborative experience, they expressed a superficial level of pedagogical learning and their thinking reflected a narrow scope from a prescriptive lens. Our findings suggest a need for teacher educators to help preservice teachers' develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of teaching during their initial experiences of learning to teach in authentic settings.

Keywords: field experiences, teacher growth and development, pedagogical knowledge

APA-Style Citation:

McMahan, S. K. & Garza, R. (2016). Fostering preservice teachers' development: Engagement in practice and learning. *Current Issues in Education*, 19(3). Retrieved from <http://cie.asu.edu/ojs/index.php/cieatasu/article/view/1550>

Accepted: October 22nd, 2016

Field experiences provide a vital component in the preparation of preservice teachers for entry into the classroom. Nationally, most teacher education programs include a field experience component as an avenue to authentically connect theory into practice (Maistre & Pare, 2010; McMahan et al., 2015). This clinical practice, acknowledged by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation Standards (CAEP, n.d.), helps to foster preservice teacher development, especially when the structure of field experiences is planned well (AACTE, 2010).

The structure of a field experience is a critical aspect linked to meaningful and authentic learning experiences for teacher candidates. A structured field experience is more than a traditional observe and reflect; it involves interactive experiences such as teaching, small group pull outs, mentoring students, and overall “learning by doing” activities. The assigned mentor teacher serves as a coach to encourage and foster preservice teacher candidates’ development of pedagogical knowledge and skills.

Boz (2012) proposed that preservice teachers begin to develop Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) before any classroom contact. If we accept this notion, then teacher development begins in the university classroom at a conceptual level that should be further enhanced through genuine classroom engagement within a structured field experience. In this study, structured field experience refers to deliberately facilitating learning and teaching opportunities for preservice teachers in an authentic school setting during established days and times. This also includes deliberate placement with a mentor teacher during the semester before the student teaching practicum. The mentor teacher is a classroom teacher who volunteers time to work collaboratively with a teacher candidate. The mentor serves as a model for teacher preparation and assists the teacher candidate in further refining his/her skill set. For purposes of this study, the mentor teacher responsibilities included: guiding the candidate’s lesson planning, scheduling a time to implement a lesson, providing feedback after instruction, participating in frequent dialogue concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate’s effectiveness in the teaching situation, guiding the candidate in making the transition from student to teacher, and conferring with the university field-based faculty liaison as needed. These expectations are viewed as collaborative in nature rather than reciprocal. The teacher education programs across the United States use a variety of approaches and methods to enhance the growth and development of preservice teachers. The field experience component, coupled with a positive mentoring opportunity, is one of the major contributing factors in the development of aspiring teachers (McMahan & Piro, 2013).

Preservice teachers must have the opportunity to practice coursework learning in order to enhance their pedagogical and content knowledge and skills as a way to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Meyer, 1997). “Rather than an emphasis on the how-to-concerns associated with routine procedures, time management, and constructing lesson plans, the preservice teacher learns to reflectively build a praxis for teaching that acts as a personal and theoretical knowledge base” (Moore, 2003, p. 33). This means that educators not only focus on providing innovative field experience options, but that they systematically include time for preservice teachers to reflect on their learning while immersed in authentic settings. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine preservice teachers’ perceptions on how a structured field experience influenced their pedagogical knowledge and development.

Review of the Literature

Teacher preparation programs have been redesigning the curriculum of educational methods courses and field experiences as a means to improve teacher education (e.g. Clark & Peterson, 1986; Huling & Resta, 2001; Zeichner, 2010). Researchers have advocated that preservice teachers need to experience the reality of working with students under the guidance of a mentor teacher (Washburn-Moses, Kopp, & Hetttersimer, 2012; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). Although quality field experiences are a key ingredient in preservice teacher preparation other aspects such as dispositions, mentorship, and coursework are linked to the development of an effective teacher (Hallam, 2009). This study is guided by a framework on field experiences and pedagogical content knowledge.

Field Experiences

Field experiences provide opportunities for preservice teachers to immerse in the culture and climate of a school and classroom (e.g. Feiman-Nemser, 2001; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996; Zeichner, 2010). Field experiences also provide opportunities to strengthen or reaffirm prior beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning (Lortie, 1975). Preservice teachers have an opportunity to teach and to learn in collaboration with an assigned mentor teacher as well as to interact with students in the classroom, often during the field experience component of their educator preparation. Traditionally, early field experiences provide foundational knowledge and are often considered observational experiences because they provide preservice teachers with opportunities to study the realities of teaching (Koran, Snow, & McDonald, 1971). Subsequent field experiences included in preservice teacher coursework provide additional opportunities to “practice” what they have learned from their pedagogical coursework. These later field experiences often employ an immersion approach where preservice teachers learn by doing (McMahan et al., 2015; Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007).

Well-structured early field experiences as well as a diverse field experience setting may help to prepare preservice teachers for 21st century classrooms. On the other hand, research by Ladson-Billings (2000) suggests that field experiences may not reflect the realities of today's complex classrooms. Therefore, it is important to expose preservice candidates to diverse placements and settings that include a diverse student population and teachers who model different instructional practices and classroom management systems. Edwards (1996) suggests that preservice teachers, having the opportunity to visit several schools prior to student teaching in multiple contexts, observe both effective and ineffective ways of working with disadvantaged children. Field experiences are critically important in developing and nurturing the preservice teacher for entry in the teaching profession (McMahan & Piro, 2013); however, preservice teachers must also reflect on those experiences as a way to ameliorate superficial knowledge.

Teacher Knowledge

Although past research indicated that a lack of structured field experiences, especially in diverse settings, contributed to the inadequate preparation of teachers (Davis & Moley, 2007), today's structured options, such as clinical practice, are viewed as a critical aspect of teacher preparation (AACTE, 2010). Moreover, as Hammerness et al. (2005) acknowledge, preservice teachers are not able to gain all the necessary cognitive and affective proficiency needed to address students' needs in a diverse classroom setting, but it is important to identify what “content and strategies” are needed to foster life-long learning. “Whereas pre-service teachers' thinking may be influenced by factors such as educational experiences, background, values, beliefs, and dispositions, reflective practice can serve to challenge and reinforce prior knowledge about the cognitive, social, emotional, and political aspects related to teaching” (Garza & Smith, 2015, p. 12). Orchestrating frequent and systematic approaches to engage preservice teachers in reflecting about their experiences can help them to explore their thinking and strengthen their connections to pedagogical instruction, thereby fostering their learning, growth, and development. As Reed and Bergemann (2005) affirm, “Those who reflect on their actions and performance are more successful than those who merely react” (p. 14). This foundation of understanding should address the “purposes of education as well as the methods and strategies of educating” (Shulman, 1987, p. 13) as a way to prevent superficial learning and making unsubstantiated assumptions within the teaching context.

Some policy makers have embraced the notion of defining teacher effectiveness by the increases of student outcomes on tests that assess their knowledge (Imig & Imig, 2007). Other

educators dialogue about the characteristics of quality teaching and the type of knowledge required to be an effective educator (Zyngier, 2007). For example, Zyngier (2007) proposed a “Productive Pedagogies framework that included intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environment, and recognition of difference” (p. 209). Shulman (1986) proposed that teaching included a combination of “content and process that included three types of content knowledge: (a) subject matter content knowledge, (b) pedagogical content knowledge, and (c) curricular knowledge” (p. 9). These different aspects contribute to an instructional proficiency that is influenced by different types of knowledge that focus on the nuances of teaching, field of study, metacognition, or dispositions (Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

While various perspectives may describe aspects related to teacher effectiveness, accrediting entities also prescribe criteria for equipping teacher candidates with appropriate preparation for quality teaching. The Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, n.d.), provides a framework for educator preparation programs to use as a guide in collecting and documenting evidence of student learning in several standards.

The following standards describe teacher characteristics relevant to our study:

“Standard 1: *Content and Pedagogical Knowledge* - The provider ensures that candidates develop a deep understanding of the critical concepts and principles of their discipline and, by completion, are able to use discipline-specific practices flexibly to advance the learning of all students toward attainment of college-and career-readiness standards, and Standard 2: *Clinical Partnerships and Practice* - The provider ensures that effective partnerships and high quality clinical practice are central to preparation so that candidates develop the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to demonstrate positive impact on all P-12 students' learning and development” (p. 3).

Prior research (Garza & Smith, 2015) indicated the value of including reflection during field experience before the student teaching practicum as a way to foster aspiring teacher's pedagogical content knowledge. However, teacher educators still need to help preservice teachers examine their developing beliefs.

Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Shulman (1986) argued that teachers PCK was reflected by making their subject matter understood by students. PCK is “the manner in which teachers relate their subject matter knowledge (what they know about what they teach) to their pedagogical knowledge (what they know about teaching) and how subject matter knowledge is part of the process of pedagogical reasoning” (Cochran, DeRuiter, & King, 1993, p. 263). This means that teachers need to understand the dynamics of teaching and learning to effectively influence student learning and success. Cochran et al. (1993) expanded on Shulman's (1986) notion of PCK and proposed a model for teacher preparation based on a constructivist view of teacher learning with “Pedagogical Content Knowing as the focus, intersected with four components: knowledge of pedagogy, knowledge of subject matter, knowledge of students, and knowledge of environmental contexts” (p. 268). They further noted that preservice teachers varied experiences during their preparation influenced the development of each type of understanding and “the construction of pedagogical content knowing resulted from multiple opportunities to teach, to observe and to reflect on one's own teaching and that of others in a content area” (p. 269). Similarly, Kleickmann et al. (2012) suggested that the quality and number of learning opportunities during

teacher preparation fostered preservice teacher's understanding of PCK. Providing relevant experiences for preservice teachers to critically examine their existing beliefs about teaching and learning while connecting theory to practice may serve as a scaffolding approach to foster their pedagogical capacity. However, to what extent do preservice teachers develop the knowledge needed for teaching during a structured field experience? Additional studies on teaching in content areas have contributed to the development of PCK that links subject matter to instructional practices in the respective content. For example, Ball, Thames, and Phelps (2008) described the mathematical knowledge and skills teachers needed for teaching and viewed pedagogical content knowledge as the component that links subject matter knowledge with the teaching performance. They concluded that although teachers need to be very knowledgeable in their content, this does not necessarily transfer to effective teaching. Pedagogical content knowledge needs to be described and "how this knowledge is used in teaching effectively" (p. 404). Therefore, it would be important to understand how a field experience prior to student teaching influences a candidate's pedagogical knowledge and skills.

In another study involving 43 preservice science teachers, Nuangchalerm (2012) suggested that inquiry-based instruction enhanced PCK with varied degrees of understanding and indicated that PCK coupled with pedagogical knowledge influenced teacher development. In other words, effective teachers need a solid understanding of both content and pedagogical knowledge. Monte-Sano and Budano (2013) furthered the dialogue on PCK by examining the instructional practices of two high school history teachers and identified specific aspects of PCK relevant to teaching the content. While they identified particular aspects of PCK for teaching history, they also identified "instructional practices that illustrate the enactment of such knowledge" (p. 207). They concluded that PCK is developed with varying degrees. Alonzo, Kobarg, and Seidel (2012) identified aspects of PCK used by two German physics teachers that influenced teachers' interactions with students. Teachers must know and be able to explain their content to students, further supporting previous research regarding the importance of both content and pedagogical knowledge. Meister and Jenks (2000) suggested, "preservice teachers need the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that help them examine their own beliefs, values, and personal experiences they bring to their understanding of teaching and learning" (p. 10).

While other studies have linked preservice teachers' pedagogical growth with mentoring experiences of adolescents (Garza & Ovando, 2012), only certain aspects of PCK have been explored and described, suggesting the complexity of developing appropriate knowledge and skills. Therefore, there "is the need for preservice teachers, their supervisors, and their mentor teachers to examine and discuss the rationale behind pedagogical decisions" (Moore, 2003, p. 40).

Preservice teachers must continue to reflect on their practice as a way to continue the development of PCK. Pedagogical growth and development may be limited without a reflective examination of their teaching and learning opportunities while placed in a structured field experience. Our investigation examined preservice teachers' perceptions of their learning experiences in order to describe their pedagogical knowledge growth and development. Hammerness et al., (2005) asserted that "While research identifies stages of teacher development, they lack a description of the characteristics of the learning experiences that may foster teacher development and growth" (p. 380). Our study contributes to the dialogue by describing the pedagogical growth fostered through a structured field experience. In doing so, we identify specific knowledge and skills that aspiring teachers perceived to have gained through authentic interactions during their placement in a mentor teacher's classroom.

Methods

In this qualitative study we used constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to examine preservice teachers' written responses to an open-ended questionnaire about their learning in a structured field experience cohort prior to the student teaching semester. This interpretative study was framed within the theoretical underpinnings of field experiences (Maistre & Pare, 2010; McMahan et al., 2015) and teacher knowledge (CAEP, n.d.). Providing early field experiences in diverse settings is critical in fostering a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of teaching and learning in academically, linguistically, economically, and socially unique classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The following questions guided this research study: 1) In what ways does a structured field experience influence preservice teachers' pedagogical growth and development? and 2) In what ways does a structured field experience help preservice teachers to link theory and practice?

Participants

Purposeful and convenience sampling (Creswell, 2007) were used to identify the participants. This means that the inquirer "purposefully selects individual participants that will best help the researcher understand the problem and research question" (Creswell, 2003, p. 185). The participants in this study were enrolled in two different faculty member's pedagogy course in the semester in which the study occurred. This allowed for data to be collected from each faculty member's course.

Participants included 49 preservice teachers from two different educator preparation programs at public institutions of higher education in the same state: 43 females (three African Americans, one Asian, seven Latinas, 31 Whites and one other) and six males (three Latinos and three Whites) in their last semester of pedagogy coursework before entering the student teaching semester. While some of the participants may have had the opportunity to observe a classroom for a specific assignment or course, this was the first structured field experience for all participants. Twenty-three of the participants were from a large university in the southwestern United States and were seeking secondary content area certification (Grades 9-12). The other 26 participants were from another institution located approximately 200 miles north of the large university and seeking elementary certification (EC-6). While both institutions are identified as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), a majority of the students enrolled at respective universities are White.

The participants were located at two different institutions and were selected because of similar contextual factors. All participants were enrolled in a 15-week structured field experience that took place at a school site. Pedagogy coursework focused on instruction, classroom management, and assessment that included teaching and learning in a structured environment within a school setting. While one university program required participants to collaborate with an assigned mentor teacher 6 hours at the school weekly, the other program required them to collaborate 15 hours at the school weekly. All participants were informed on the scope of the course and field experience requirements on the first class day of the semester. Both school sites were located near a large metropolitan area, enrolled a diverse student population, and were identified as Title I campuses. The school sites were already established clinical field sites. Participants at each school site were assigned a mentor teacher in their respective content and certification area by the faculty of the course, and collaborated with the same mentor teacher throughout the semester. Since both institutions had an established structured field experience at the school sites, strong relationships between mentor teachers campus administrators, team leads, faculty liaisons, and the university faculty member had been formed. The school faculty who had

previously served as mentor teachers were seasoned in how to best support preservice teacher candidates as they transitioned from the role of a college student to that of an aspiring teacher. This allowed each participant to have a direct activity related to his/her field experience placement. Participants collaborated with their mentor teacher and engaged in the daily routines of the classroom teacher such as conducting instruction, participating in tutorials, and analyzing student performance data. The university instructor from both institutions was also on the school campus site during the required field experience time frame, which helped to foster the school-university relationship. Unlike other field placements in which the university instructor is not on site and has an informal relationship with the school campus, this structured field experience was planned in coordination with the school campus administrators and the actual university pedagogy class was held on the school campus.

Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered using written responses from an open-ended questionnaire collected from preservice teachers at two different institutions at the end of the spring 2013 semester (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) and approved by the university's institutional review board. Having knowledge of the study, participants completed the questionnaire as a classroom activity with no grade or reward attached to it. The questionnaire, crafted by the university faculty, was informed by the literature and the purpose of this research study. The survey included the following questions: (a) In what ways did your cooperating teacher (mentor teacher) foster your development as a teacher? Please provide specific examples; (b) In what ways has the block field experience fostered your development as a teacher? (c) What were you expecting from the block field experience to prepare you as a future teacher that you didn't obtain? (d) In what ways have you transitioned from student to professional? (e) In what ways did the field experience foster your knowledge about teaching and learning? These open ended questions, specific in content and aligned with our research questions, allowed for individual responses that conveyed personal perceptions about teaching and learning.

Data Analysis

The data sources were analyzed independently by each researcher using qualitative data reduction strategies in order to manage, categorize, and interpret data to identify themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). To ensure inter-coder reliability, we independently sifted through the surveys using open-coding strategies to reduce the concepts and identify their properties (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). When the coding was complete, the data was grouped into categories; then through constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) we each sorted and further reduced the categories with descriptive statements taken from questionnaires. We then discussed the initial codes and preliminary categories, and again independently using constant comparative analysis and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006), sorted and placed the data into new themes. A deeper analysis of the data was done by comparing initial codes and notes to generate an initial list of recurring themes. We finally examined and refined the themes, their labels, and their descriptive statements before agreeing on the themes. Trustworthiness was added by peer debriefing at multiple intervals of the data analysis (McMillan, 2012).

Findings

Orchestrating a structured field experience for preservice teachers before student teaching provides them with an opportunity to authentically engage and interact with a diverse student population. Our study explored preservice teachers' perceptions of their pedagogical growth and how they connected theory to practice. Analysis of the data revealed three main themes related to

preservice teacher development within the field experience context. The following themes reflected the voices of preservice teachers in a structured field experience: (a) viewing through a prescriptive lens, (b) valuing the collaborative experience, and (c) fostering self-awareness.

Viewing through a Prescriptive Lens

Viewing through a prescriptive lens in this study refers to preservice teachers' superficial conceptions regarding pedagogical connections during the field experience. Prescriptive learning encompasses preservice teachers' observations about effective teaching practices without critically reflecting on the phenomenon.

The participants identified effective instructional pedagogy whenever their observations directly linked to their course work. One participant noted: "It was great to see the different teachers and teaching styles" and another reported, "This class allowed me to see what happens during most of the school day." While their classroom experiences provided them with an opportunity to recognize how a variety of approaches were important in the teaching process, these statements describe a teacher's daily teaching activities as a contributing factor to their learning without providing a rationale to support their thinking.

A majority of the participants were quick to point out specific instructional strategies that they perceived as beneficial to their overall learning experience. One participant commented: "I learned so many teaching methods like magic hat, visual cards, think, pair and share." Another participant affirmed "my mentor had a lot of great ideas to engage her students...I am glad I got the opportunity so now I have more tricks for my bag." These comments reflect a gaining of ideas rather than the pedagogical understanding of their use in the classroom. Participants described the application of instructional techniques that spoke to them during teaching episodes throughout the day.

Their classroom experiences were also instrumental in terms of seeing classroom management techniques. Several participants believed they learned a lot observing how to manage a classroom and prevent disruptive situations. "My mentor teacher helped me develop an understanding for discipline in the classroom and how to handle situations with behavior. I learned that sometimes you need to give students ultimatums when it comes to their behaviors..." stated a participant. In this instance, there is an expressed rationale for the approach used by a teacher. A similar sentiment echoed the value of learning more about classroom management techniques: "I learned from my mentor to layout your rules in the very beginning and be mean the first couple of weeks; otherwise they probably won't listen to you." This statement expresses a narrow rationale but also conveys the importance of providing opportunities for students to work with teachers who have difficult students as well as master teachers. One participant expressed that

"They wish they had seen more problem behaviors. I feel like if I would have had the opportunity to watch how a teacher handles problematic situations I would be even more prepared with having to handle them myself in the future."

Again, the participants saw classroom management techniques being employed in the field experience as good practices that influenced their thinking about effective ways to manage a classroom.

Participants' responses are noted as learning through a prescriptive lens because they illustrate surface level learning. This learning describes preservice teachers understanding from what is actually observed. These statements reflect a superficial grasp of the dynamics associated with effective teaching because they fail to recognize the importance of different teaching styles

and the influence on student learning; however, their learning connects to their course work. The participants viewed these connections as learning even though they did not explain how it contributed to their learning. These classroom episodes were perceived as beneficial to their growth without critically thinking about the context in which they occurred. The specific instructional strategies were prescriptive in nature because they described superficial learning without a deep understanding of their impact on student learning and success. Participants only identified the approach and failed to reflect on the dynamics of teaching and the classroom factors that promoted the perceived successful practices. Therefore, they attributed growth because they “saw” good teaching practices; not truly understanding that growth involves critical reflection.

Classroom management responses resemble superficial aspects of learning, similar to the generalized responses regarding instructional practices. These statements are superficial because they describe what was implemented in the classroom and are accepted as a panacea for all behavioral challenges. A participant noted “my mentor had a great discipline system set up.” Another participant stated their growth and development was impacted because they “learned firsthand the importance of classroom management strategies and the need for it to make the most of classroom instruction time”. Participants failed to notice the other factors that contribute to effective classroom management practices, such as the culture for learning, the physical arrangement of the classroom, meeting students’ needs, and relationships (Scarlett, Ponte, & Singh, 2009).

Valuing the Collaborative Experience

Learning and teaching alongside a mentor teacher helped preservice teachers to become closer and more connected to the realities of the daily classroom. Preservice teachers acknowledged the value of the collaborative experience working jointly with another person’s support. Participants believed that their mentor teacher was instrumental in helping them to develop and to refine their pedagogical skills and pedagogical content area knowledge. “Being involved with my mentor and spending more time with my mentor” was a sentiment conveyed by most participants. The participants reported that their learning and pedagogical growth was strengthened through the collaborative experience. Participants recognized that their mentor teachers invested time and effort to help them learn more about the daily intricacies of teaching. A participant noted “my teacher was very open and was happy to answer any questions that I had. She let me accompany her to her teacher meeting and always explained stuff they talked about.” Another participant stated her mentor was also valuable because “she helped me see that it’s okay to not know everything. Beforehand I thought I had to know all the answers.” Still, another stated that she valued her mentor teacher’s insight because “she would sit down with me and explain the strengths and weaknesses of my lessons.” Participants also recognized the open lines of communication as an important part of the learning experience. As one participant stated “their personal stories and advice that I was given as to what I should do when in certain situations have given me a great outlook as to what my future will look like.” The communication between the participant and the mentor was impactful because it enhanced participants’ knowledge about challenging issues they might face in their teaching career. These statements convey the importance of having a mentor teacher to discuss the nuances of teaching with an aspiring preservice teacher. They also indicate that mentor teachers need to explicitly explain the nuances of their practice to extend preservice teachers’ thinking from a technical aspect to a critical aspect. Preservice teachers need to know and understand why specific instructional approaches are selected and the intended outcomes of their decisions.

Participants acknowledged the impact of the experience teaching and learning alongside a mentor teacher (Mullen, 2002). The participants perceived the value of their placement with a mentor teacher because they “got a behind the scenes look at what it’s like to be a teacher.” Comments such as “I wanted to be involved more,” “I wish I could of taught more lessons and been more involved with the kids,” and “I wanted to be in the class more and spend more one-on-one time with my mentor teacher to ask questions,” suggest the positive influence on participants’ dispositions regarding teaching and learning.

Fostering Self-Awareness

The overall experience was important for facilitating a self-awareness of what it means to be a teacher. The idea of fostering self-awareness refers to preservice teachers’ understanding of their professional role. This self-awareness includes characteristics and dispositions that teachers must embody. Participants noted that they were now prepared for the teaching profession because they had to “act grown up.” They defined this state of using professional language to communicate and dressing in professional attire. One participant commented: “every time I go [out to the school] I remind myself to dress and act like a professional,” and another reiterated, “I find myself being more professional everyday by the way I dress, talk and hold myself in front of my peers and students.” Similarly, another participant expressed:

“I made sure students referred to me as Mrs. [name] and I wore very professional clothes and my whole demeanor was as if I was already a teacher. I even noticed students taking that in and showing me a different kind of respect that I have received in the past.”

While the participants embraced the idea of seeing themselves as a professional, this thinking was not framed through a depth of understanding even though they had the opportunity to practice their role in a genuine setting. One participant stated, “I am sure I can hold my own class now. I have learned I am capable of teaching and leading a group of students.” Even though the experience fostered a level of confidence and reinforced participants’ desire to become a teacher, the comment reflects a nascent understanding of knowledge and skills instrumental in fostering a professional stance (Hammerness et al., 2005).

Discussion

While participants attributed growth to seeing what they observed and its effect on students in the classroom, they failed to question their assumptions and to think critically about the significance of their perspective (Hammerness et al., 2005). Preservice teachers perceived their growth as a teacher through a prescriptive lens because they reacted to what was observed and not to the technical aspects of teaching. While their new learning reflects a surface level of understanding the dynamics of teaching, it provides a pedagogical foundation of knowledge that can be enhanced with practice (Cochran et al., 1993). Participants noted that the hands on experience helped to foster their understanding of what constitutes a professional educator (Shulman, 1987). The participants perceived their growth because they saw effective practices being utilized in the classroom and embraced them as approaches they could utilize. However, participants failed to connect the instructional process to theory.

The structured field experience fostered preservice teacher’s growth as a teacher by connecting what they learned in their pedagogy classes to actual practice, but without linking their learning to theory. Although preservice teachers connected their growth and development as a teacher to actual observations and experiences, this view supports the importance of designing appropriate field experiences that challenge and enhance preservice teacher growth

and development (Zeichner, 2010). In spite of this, field experiences provide opportunities for preservice teachers to make sense of conceptual knowledge of the teaching profession.

It was evident in the participants' responses that the learning experiences situated in a structured field experience were influential to their growth as a teacher because they commented on the pedagogical practices reflected in the daily realities and routines of the classroom (Cochran et al., 1993). The participants' comments highlighted effective instructional practices and management approaches as a critical component of their pedagogical growth (Ball et al., 2008). Participants expressed the desire to spend more time interacting with students and the mentor teacher because it was impactful to their professional growth. By "doing more" in the field-based practicum experience, they felt their own learning and development was positively impacted, much in concert with findings by Kleickmann et al. (2012).

Participants expressed they grew as a teacher by spending more time with the students and mentor teacher and by participating in meaningful activities, not tutoring kids. They did not see "tutoring" kids as a valuable component of their practicum experience, in contrast to research that suggested the value of this experience (Garza & Ovando, 2012). Participants wanted to do more "teacher stuff" rather than tutor. Preservice teachers perceived these tasks as not critical to their growth as an aspiring teacher. This reaffirms they were not able to critically think about why certain practices were used; they wanted to just learn from what they saw in the experience through a prescriptive lens without thinking about other factors that influenced the context of the classroom (Alonzo et al., 2012). Thinking long-term about the implications of the learning experience was not something the participants were able to grasp; however, as Monte-Sano and Budano (2013) suggested, their level of knowledge and skills develops over time. Participants were more concerned with the "here and now" and failed to see that true growth takes time and requires critical thinking and application to oneself. They were more focused on the mechanistic aspects of teaching and not "how classroom episodes can help the individual to see theory in action and recognize the effectiveness of its application" (Garza & Smith, 2015, p. 9).

Preservice teachers in our study not only recognized the value of teaching and learning while observing theory in practice (Garza & Ovando, 2012; Mullen, 2002), they also expressed an emergent interpretation of self-awareness about what it means to be a teacher. Taggart and Wilson (1998) explained that teachers fail to focus on the critical aspects of teaching as a result of their inexperience with the intricacies of teaching. Chong, Low, and Goh (2011) noted that novice educators find the dynamics of teaching demanding because when they focus on the self, their pedagogical perspective is limited. In contrast, preservice teachers connected their observations of effective practices and perceived this as a way to effectively manage their future classroom. Although this reflects a superficial perspective, as Kleickmann et al. (2012) suggested, it is necessary to orchestrate learning opportunities for preservice teachers to continue to enhance their understanding of the complex dynamics of teaching. They have yet come to the realization how understanding theory is critical to their pedagogical development.

Additionally, preservice teachers attributed various constructs about the meaning of professionalism in the teaching profession. It is only surface area learning because they focused on the self that included aspects of (grooming and professional language). They failed to express how professional communication, interaction, and appearance influence students' learning and collaboration with colleagues (Chong et al., 2011). Preservice teachers also failed to recognize the overall impact of lifelong learning through their narrow focus of reporting specific instructional strategies, classroom management practices, mentoring experiences and specific professional appearances as influential in their growth as a teacher (Hammerness, 2005).

Limitations

Our study is limited by the small number of participants from two different public universities and included all level preservice teachers enrolled in two different certification programs. Participants in other educator preparation programs and geographical areas might encounter a different set of circumstances that may influence their learning experiences in a structured field experience setting. Although our findings add to the research on pedagogical growth by illuminating preservice teachers' voices, our interpretations of the findings are based on perceived experiences of preservice teachers in a mentor's classroom. Therefore, caution should be taken when generalizing the conclusions from this study to other field-based experiences with similar learning and teaching contexts.

Implications

Understanding preservice teachers' growth in a structured field experience prior to student teaching may inform teacher educators how to better structure learning opportunities that will enhance pedagogical knowledge. Assessing and understanding preservice teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skills may provide insight into the process of learning how to teach (Fives & Buehl, 2008). Our study contributes to the body of research on teacher knowledge by identifying those aspects of "learning, social and cultural contexts, and teaching" that need further understanding to help preservice teachers improve their practice (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Our findings suggest that although preservice teachers' growth was limited in scope, their pedagogical development was enhanced through the structured field experience. In concert with findings by Monte-Sano and Budano (2013), participants obtained pedagogical knowledge with varying degrees of understanding. Their observations and involvement in an authentic classroom setting with the guidance of a mentor teacher influenced their thinking about teaching and their teacher identity. This implies that field experiences must have a deliberate purpose (Shulman, 1986). Second, our findings reinforce the importance of a structured field experience before student teaching to help preservice teachers to link theory to practice. Although the participants expressed various aspects that contributed to their emergent teacher identity, the focus was on the self as professional and actual classroom observations, reflecting a narrow perspective about professionalism and dispositions. This suggests that teacher educators must help preservice teachers to reflect critically about their learning and observations through a systematic process that includes regular interpersonal and/or intrapersonal dialogue. In addition, "early field experiences should be carefully structured, guiding future teachers in their overall development through the assistance of competent cooperating teachers willing to work in conjunction with the university to foster appropriate development" (Aiken & Day, 1999, p. 9).

Further research might explore how preservice teachers' superficial learning can be enhanced during the student teaching practicum. It is especially important not to orchestrate field experience opportunities that focus solely on exposing preservice teachers to the complex dynamics of teaching, but also to deliberately ensure that they are systematically crafted to strengthen preservice teachers thinking to promote their pedagogical growth and development. In doing so, preservice teachers may be more effective in the classroom as they begin their careers in education (CAEP, n.d.).

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Author Notes

Sarah K. McMahan, Ph.D.
Department of Teacher Education
Texas Woman's University
PO Box 425769, Denton, TX 76204
smcmahan@twu.edu

Sarah McMahan, Ph.D. is an Associate Professor of Teacher Education at Texas Woman's University. Her research focus is in the area of school/university partnerships and preservice/novice teacher induction and mentoring.

Rubén Garza, Ph.D.
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Texas State University
601 University Drive, ED Bldg. Room 3075, San Marcos, TX 78666
ruben.garza2001@gmail.com

Rubén Garza, Ph.D. is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Texas State University. His research interests include mentoring, preservice teacher education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and Latino education.



Current Issues in Education

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

Volume 19, Issue 3

January 17, 2016

ISSN 1099-839X



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