

Pre-service Teacher Reflections on Collaborative Field Experiences

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Abstract: *This qualitative research study was on a community project between a Southwestern public Teacher Education program and a local public-school district. The theoretical frame consisted of teacher reflective practices. Participants were 19 preservice teachers in their last semester before student-teaching. Data collection spanned the fall 2019 (13 participants) and spring 2020 (6 participants) semesters. This study sought to answer the following research question: How have field experiences influenced students' perceptions of classroom management the semester before student teaching? Data was analyzed and thematically organized using NVivo qualitative research software.*

Key Words: Field experiences, preservice teachers, reflective practice, student teaching

FIELD EXPERIENCES

Field experiences are a critical component of any teacher education program (Wyss, et al., 2012). They aim to provide preservice teachers the opportunity to put into practice the theories, methods and techniques studied during teacher education coursework. Field experiences have a fundamental mission in preparing preservice teachers for the world of teaching and teacher candidates are expected to be involved in a reciprocal interaction with learners in real classrooms during their field experiences (Köksal, & Genç, 2019). According to Stenberg, et al. (2016), field experiences are considered an important part of enhancing theory to practice reflection; are seen as opportunities for implementing theoretical elements; and are strengthened by school–university collaboration (Allen, 2011).

As part of their field experiences, teacher candidates were assigned the task of keeping a reflective journal to document their experiences. The purpose of this study was to understand student perceptions of classroom management by eliciting reflective responses to the following research question: How have field experiences influenced student perceptions of classroom management the semester before student teaching?

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reflective practice is an idea that has dominated the field of education since John Dewey first introduced it in 1933. According to Dewey, reflective thought is an “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it leads” (p. 6). Educational researchers have

contended that reflective practice improves teacher effectiveness (Fendler, 2003 and Mayes, 2002). Weber (2013) argued that reflective practice “is a skill that is beneficial to preservice teachers because it guides them to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and leads them to be more effective as teachers” (p. 53). According to Zeichner & Liston (1996), reflective practice is a professional development strategy that encourages practitioners to look “both inwardly at his or her own practice and outwardly at the social conditions in which this practice is situated” (p. 208). The authors also contended that educators should be able to make pedagogical choices based on the situation and give reasons for their actions.

Weber (2013) maintained that, “Being a critically and reflectively thinking teacher means incorporating metacognition in order to inquire about an event or an issue, review the possibilities and choose the best solution for that event or issue” (p. 53). Similarly, Anderson and Matkins (2011) argued, “developing critical reflective practice abilities in teachers establishes skills that preservice teachers need to reflect ‘on action’ and become skilled reflective practitioners” (p. 36). In order to help pre-service teachers develop into reflective practitioners, the skill of reflection must be taught and fostered from the beginning of the process of learning to teach (Lee, 2007). Reflection is critical to successful pre-service teacher training, but it is difficult to teach and can be challenging students to conceptualize (Aubusson et al., 2010). In order to prevent the creation of obstacles in their thinking pre-service teachers must be able to examine, or critique, what they have concluded about themselves as learners; and confront their own beliefs about the meaning of “good teaching” before they can unpack the preconceived notions of society’s expectations (Batchelor, 2012).

A number of approaches have been used to promote reflective practice in teacher education, one of which is journal writing (Lee, 2007). Journals are considered useful instruments for developing reflection, since they allow pre-service teachers a space to reflect on their thinking and learning. According to Yost et al. (2000), journaling provides a venue to establish connections between content and practical experience. Mariko (2011) found that keeping a reflective journal not only allows one to record what happened or what was observed, but also supports the development of new ideas and understanding to make sense of experiences encountered. Reflective journaling allows pre-service teachers to keep an account of their own experiences and observations, to examine and understand them better, and to make informed decisions about actions. Reflective journaling is a powerful tool to support pre-service teachers become reflective, critical, and constructive learners.

METHODS

This teacher preparation reflective research project collected qualitative data in the form of reflective essays from pre-service teachers the semester before entering student teaching. Data consisted of responses to nine online discussions surrounding the themes of theory to practice and a final reflective assignment on their thoughts on being in the field.

RESEARCH SITE/PARTNERSHIP

In the fall of 2019, a teacher education department at a small rural public university and a local public-school district developed a mutually beneficial community partnership. For the university, the partnership served to provide students with more diverse experiences, particularly surrounding the needs of English Language Learners and children from a lower socio-economic class. For the school district, their interest was to have additional resources for their students and

tap into the pool of preservice teacher candidates in order to hire them for hard to fill positions. This collaboration included the implementation of engaging and culturally relevant teaching strategies, first in a university classroom, then in the field.

The partnership included one day a week, in a university setting, where faculty presented creative and engaging practices, and lessons that explored theories relevant to the field experience. On another day, in the field, the preservice teachers implemented the ideas and practices learned in their university classroom, under the supervision of the university faculty members. The school district participated in a cost-share approach to the partnership by providing a bus to pick-up the pre-service teachers from the university at least once a week, and provided an intensive one-day training with a meet and greet designed to connect our preservice teachers with their mentor teachers.

The public-school district was considered a high needs district, serving a disproportionate number of Hispanic and low-income students. Similarly, the public university was designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution with a significant number of first-generation students.

PARTICIPANTS

Nineteen (out of 20 eligible) senior block pre-service teachers in a local public university agreed to participate in this study - 13 of the 14 in the fall semester of 2019, and six of the six in the spring semester of 2020. Of 19 students, ten were secondary education majors (English, Math, Science, Music, Physical Education) enrolled in the Assessment, Classroom Management, and Content Area Literacy classes (and possibly their content area focus). The remaining nine participants were elementary education majors enrolled in Assessment, Classroom Management, Science Methods, and Literacy II.

During the fall 2019 and spring 2020 semesters, these pre-service teacher candidates spent every Tuesday from 7-4:30 at the university partnership public school. Every Thursday, these students were in face-to-face classes held at the university. The first Tuesday was spent observing and getting to know their partnering mentor teacher, thereafter these students conducted classroom activities that engaged the students in their selected classrooms. Beginning in the second week the teacher candidates became active participants in the classrooms. Specifically, these students conducted learning activities that they designed under the supervision of the university Teacher Education faculty of their respective courses and/or their field mentor. These field experiences consisted of culturally relevant practices and reflections on their relevance.

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection consisted of a final reflective assignment from participants at the end of the semester. Students were instructed to reflect on what they learned in the semester. Data was collected from the fall of 2019. The 13 participants included: two English, two Physical Education, one Science, one Math, and seven elementary education majors. In spring of 2020, the six participants included: three elementary, one music, one English, and one Physical Education major. Together, 19 participants completed reflective papers. Of these 19 participants, seven needed to take an additional semester to complete requirements before student teaching. These requirements included passing all or part of the PRAXIS exam or taking an additional university course.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data was analyzed and thematically organized using NVivo qualitative research software. The essays were read with a focus on theory to practice and students' main perceptions on classroom management from their time in the field. NVivo software was used to create word clouds. The following word cloud is comprised the 25 most frequent words that are five letters or more. Creswell & Creswell (2018) argued that qualitative analysis "involves segmenting and taking apart the data (like peeling the layers of an onion) as well as putting it back together" (p. 192). The researchers read and analyzed each of the nineteen participant papers to search for themes. This process included "winnowing the data" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is the "process of focusing in on some of the data and disregarding other parts of it". (p. 192). Creswell & Creswell (2018) contended that the purpose is to "aggregate data into a small number of themes" (p. 192).

FINDINGS

Presentation of the data included using NVivo to create a word cloud (Appendix B). The top 25 words, with five or more words, was used to create the below illustration, which highlights the main terminology and concerns of the participants. The final reflective assignment (Appendix A) asked students to summarize their field experiences and what they learned. The directions for the assignment was meant to be vague in order to allow the participants to determine on their own what they took away from their field placements. As stated in the assignment description, participants were asked to include their "ideas on learner engagement; bridge theory to practice; your opinions and on various classroom management topics" (Appendix A). The task was focused on gauging participant's ideas on what they took away from their field placement.

The major themes to emerge from the final essay from the field experiences, the semester before student teaching were: planning and preparation, reflection, relationship building, and theory to practice.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

All nineteen participants mentioned the importance of planning and being prepared. One student commented, "An overprepared teacher is the best kind of teacher". Another student commented, "All of these things [classroom management problems] can be avoided with proper planning." The participant went on provide an example stating, "...always having extra copies, making sure the next activity is ready to step into, and always preparing more work than they will need." Another participant discussed the importance of having supplies readily available stating, "if any student ever needed a pencil there was a place for them to go quickly grab one and get started for the day." For this participant, routines could also promote responsibility. She goes on to explain that there are two pencil bins one for sharp pencils and another bin for needs to be sharpened, this led students, "to be responsible for putting their dull pencils in the correct place."

Setting a routine and being organized appeared in connection to the preparation. Expectations, goal setting, and/or objectives were identified and expressed that the teacher could "point at the expectations" to provide clarity. Structures and procedures were highlighted with time management being a central concern among participants in planning lessons. One student described teaching the same lesson in different class sizes and how this is effects time management. She states, "In the smaller classes, they were much more willing to talk about what they had written and how they had interpreted the video but it also went by quicker because there were so few of

them and I was left trying to find more to have them do.” Here the preservice participant reflects on time management and how it effects planning. This could be viewed as an overlap of the themes that emerged in their final reflections.

One student described the balance between curiosity and structure noting, “I think a good mix and compromise between the two would be beneficial to my teaching and the students I would have in the future”.

Engagement and enjoying lessons were also elements that participants discussed as part of their planning in their final reflections. One student commented, “the more the students enjoy the games the more likely they are to stay active all class”

Within the planning, having smooth transitions was mentioned by three participants. One student mentioned consistency and explained that meant, “there is a specific response [to] a certain kind of behavior”. The participant explains further that, “consequences should not be isolating punishments, but rather make the student feel responsible for their action and offer the opportunity to correct the behavior”.

One student identified a specific lesson structure (SIPPS) as a successful strategy to explicitly teach reading skills and strategies. Further the participant explains, “these lesson plans explain what is going to be taught and how...”

In reference to planning there were also comments related to “taking multiple attempts to explain” and the importance of planning for a substitute. One preservice teacher commented, “One thing I saw that I really would’ve never thought of until field experience was good things to write into sub plans”. This participant goes on to provide an example of an autistic student who was punished by a substitute teacher for things beyond their control.

REFLECTION

Nineteen of the nineteen students either explicitly mentioned reflection and/or illustrated it in their essay. When a participant disagreed and critically analyzed with their mentor teacher’s strategies, the participant noted prior field experiences as a justification as to why they disagreed with the strategy. For example, one participant disagreed with threatening to remove recess if students did not comply. Her reflection referred to another field experience at least a year prior and explained how that was more effective then threatening to remove recess. This demonstrates that the participant not only reflected on their current field experiences, but also was able to compare that to prior experiences.

On student explained, “I learned quick reflection on my practice in between blocks, and I learned how to differentiate my instruction depending on what students I had.” Another participant commented, “I noticed myself make changes that I thought could help me better give instructions of manage class behavior.” The participant stated,

For example, with my first group of first graders I did not tell them to stay on one side of the volleyball net because in my mind I just assumed they already knew to not go on the other side of the net. So, when the next class of first graders came in, I remembered to tell them to stay on this side of the net or there will be consequences.

The participant went on to explain preventing unwanted behavior rather than correcting it when it happens. He stated, “Another thing I noticed was that telling students they would be out if they went on the other side of the net really scared them and that reduced the number of students

that went on the other side or how many times those students crossed over.” This implies that with each lesson taught the preservice teacher was consciously or unconsciously changing their behavior to fit the needs of the class.

Participants were able to apply the concepts to their future teaching and critically reflected on what they were doing.

Establishing a safe and comfortable environment blended both planning and building relationships. One student commented, “I also know that students learn the best when they are comfortable and at home in their learning environment.” Reflecting on what they had learned in the program one student commented, “the biggest mistake we can make is assuming that one or even a handful of strategies will work for every group of kids”.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Eleven of the nineteen students discussed teacher-student relationship building. Putting things into the positive, one student provided language that she will use in her future classrooms, such as “wow I really like how so and so is doing this” or “I can tell so and so is ready because he/she is doing this.” She summarizes the effect of this, by stating, “this made students who were off task get back on task without having to get after them”.

Interestingly, the students who commented on relationship building as a key component of classroom management saw it an essential. For example, one participant stated,

I found that one of the most effective classroom management strategies is to build relationships with your students. If you go through the effort of learning about your students and finding out who they are and how they learn and build a basis of respect and understanding between you and they will talk to you when they have a problem and they will be more likely to listen to you and to pay attention to you.

The above comments illustrate the importance of building a relationship with students to better the classroom environment and that students’ connection to the content. This preservice teacher put the responsibility for building that relationship on the teacher, arguing that the teacher needs to learn about the student.

Two students explicitly discussed a balance of “strictness to friendliness” with Another preservice student explained that when a student was disruptive it was important to, “understand why the student was acting up and explain what is expected”. Yet another participant described it as “friendly not friends”.

One participant discussed having their students line up to be “greeted into the classroom” by the teacher before entering. This promotes a more positive atmosphere. One participant stated that he learned, “from his mentor teacher that if you treat the students good they will treat you good”. He goes further and states that the teacher needs to respect their students explaining, “this respect that [the mentor teacher] has for students allows for a smooth running class with hardly any disciplinary actions.” Here there is an explicit connection between building relationships between the student and teacher and classroom management.

Similarly, another participant went a little further and commented, “If [teachers] can build that community in our class and learn to accept people for who they are then we will learn to avoid those distractions and make the best out of our time together.” Here the participant is moving from relationship building an equitable building a community. The participant ends their essay stating,

“teachers learn from their students and each student is one of a kind and so is each group of kids”. Here is the essence of teaching.

THEORY TO PRACTICE

Although students were encouraged in the assignment description to include theory to practice, seven of the nineteen students explicitly mentioned theory. One explained the difficulty of implementing theoretical concepts by stating, “I believe that I had a good idea of classroom management from the theory taught in class, but putting it into action was a completely different story”. Similarly, another student commented, “So I’m sure actually controlling a classroom is going to be nothing like the theory.” Only one student explicitly discussed the task “to bridge theory into practice”. This participant explained a change in their theoretical leanings from an essentialist perspective toward progressivism and provided an example of this theory of how incorporating “a project based curriculum” lends itself for greater student engagement and “more [towards a] student-teacher relationship in the curriculum.”

One student directly connected the lesson activities to theory discussed in class. She states, “I want students to be actively learning and engaged in a project of some kind. This aligns with the Constructivist theory that we discussed in class.”

CONCLUSIONS & EDUCATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE

This research is significant to understanding the intricacies of building collaborative partnerships between University Departments of Teacher Education and local public school districts. These types of partnerships foster benefits for both the teacher education programs and the school districts. In response to the main research question: How have field experiences influenced students’ perceptions of classroom management the semester before student teaching? The findings revealed that preservice teachers are greatly influenced by their field experiences and connect classroom management to the main themes that emerged: Planning-preparation, building relationships, reflective practice, and theory to practice. These are essential components of classroom management. Preservice participants demonstrated an increase in knowledge and practical application of engagement and culturally relevant teaching strategies both of which enhance classroom management.

Wong, et. al., (2014) contended that classroom management, “is invisible when performed at its best. It is apparent when it is missing from classrooms” (p. 2). Wong, et. al., (2014) espoused the work of Kounin stating it is the teacher’s behavior that produces, “high student engagement, reduces student misbehavior, and maximizes instructional time” (p. 5). Similarly, the teacher candidates’ reflections noted the importance of teachers being well prepared to proactively prevent misbehaving.

Thorsborne and Blood’s (2013) theoretical frame of classroom management advocated for restorative rather than punitive measures and contended that building “healthy relationships” is the foundation (p.12). They further argued that, “implementing restorative practice is about changing the hearts and minds of everyone so that they are focused on strengthening and repairing relationships in their classrooms and across the school community” (p. 11). The component of this philosophy, which stresses building positive relationships, is evident in the student responses surrounding building relationships.

The participants’ responses clearly indicated the need for teachers to be proactive in classroom management. This is aligned to Harlacher (2015), who argued, “a proactive approach

that draws from three theoretical principles: (1) behaviorism and applied behavior analysis, (2) direct instruction of desirable behaviors, and (3) predictability and structure” (p. 7). Harlacher (2015) essentially argued for teachers to be well prepared and connect practice to research and theory.

As Wyss, et al., (2012) posited, field experiences are a critical component of any teacher education program. Along these lines, reflection plays a key component. Developing pre-service teachers into reflective practitioners is a skill that must be taught (Lee, 2007). This is particularly relevant for classroom management.

Further research is needed to understand the role faculty play in better understanding the needs and concerns of pre-service teachers in the field, particularly when in the process of integrating theory into practice.

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APPENDIX A

Assignment Description

Field Experience Reflection (25%)

The purposes of field observations are to help you develop an awareness of the strategies that effective teachers use to manage students in the classroom. Your task is to summarize what you have learned from your observations. Specifically, record and evaluate what you have learned from your field experiences. Please include: Your ideas on learner engagement, bridge classroom theory to classroom practice, and your opinions and various classroom management topics. (2-3 pages)