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Professional Learning Opportunities for Teacher Candidates

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Professional Learning Opportunities for Teacher Candidates

Victoria Seeger and Chad Boyles

Introduction

The purpose of the study was to examine how early professional learning experiences might impact pre-service or beginning teachers' views of professional development. The participants for the study were pre-service teachers, also coined teacher candidates or "aspiring teachers," (National Education Association, 2020) who had opportunities to attend conferences with faculty, then participated in related presentations following those experiences. Additionally, some of the participants published professionally with the faculty involved. The research explored how those early experiences impacted the pre-service and novice teachers' perceptions of professional development and how those experiences influenced their practice once they entered the field of teaching.

The qualitative case study followed undergraduates as they progressed into experiences as graduate students and first and second year teachers, and explored how professional learning experiences as undergraduates impacted their perceptions of themselves as students and as beginning teachers.

Defining Professional Learning

In an overview of professional learning standards, (*Standards for Professional Learning Quick Reference Guide*, 2019) describes what is critical to becoming an effective educator within a learning community involving a commitment to "…continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment" and related to data seeking "…to deepen their knowledge and expand their portfolio of skills and practices, always striving to increase each student's performance" (LearningForward, 2019). These standards help us define what professional learning is and what we can expect from educators that develop skills aligning to them.

In its *Great Teaching and Learning Report* (National Education Association, 2020), the National Education Association (NEA), notes that educators need "deep learning" (p. 6) if connections are to be made between theories learned in teacher preparation programs and what is actually practiced in classrooms. Further, it notes the importance of reflection as well as coaching and mentoring which are vital to honing teaching skills and abilities. The report also cites the importance of a teacher preparation program whose faculty can "model the commitment to lifelong learning, deeper understanding of pedagogy and culture, and contribute to the growth of" (National Education Association, 2020) teacher candidates. It advocates for early experiences wherein novice teachers experience "the pervasive culture of collaboration" (National Education Association, 2020) at the heart of this research.

The criteria indicated in standards and reports, like those published by LearningForward and the National Education Association, explain how the instructors develop expectations for the teacher

candidates in order to take advantage of the professional learning opportunities described. These include requirements to participate in sessions, to plan for presentations outside of classes (i.e., on their own time), agreement and willingness to make presentations with the instructors, attend conferences with instructors while still being held responsible for completing all of their educator preparation coursework as well as other content courses, and present to peers in some courses following attendance of the conferences.

Participants

Fifteen teacher candidates became the research participants in this study. The candidates were purposefully selected for the study based on the opportunities they had to work with faculty in professional learning situations that would more likely be attended by faculty already in the profession or those typically attended by pre-service teachers. All of the research participants were engaged in literacy, social studies, or special education methods coursework at the time of their professional learning experiences. At the time of the surveys and focus groups, some participants were student teaching while others were in their first or second years of teaching.

Literature Review

Little literature exists describing professional learning for teacher candidates. Boreen, Johnson, Niday, and Potts (2009) note, "Not enough has been written about beginning teachers and setting goals to guide future professional development" (pp. 143-44). It could be posited that very little has been written regarding teacher candidates' professional learning, either. In contrast, much literature exists regarding which professional learning experiences benefit novice teachers. The literature review portion of this study looks at what is critical for "growing" teachers and how the development of teachers begins the journey of a reflective, competent educator. The teacher candidates were mentored by faculty who consistently modeled how to reflect and develop capacity for the process, invited the candidates into reflective discussions, and demonstrated that "Reflection is the key to all learning--to its understanding, to its application, and to its impact. As leaders of learning and professional development, one of our first and most important jobs to achieve a *system of learning* is to develop reflective students and educators" (Iowa, 2016).

What can readily be found in the literature is related to new teacher mentoring. Moir, Barlin, Gless and Miles (2009), when discussing educator mentoring, acknowledge that new teachers already enter the profession as consumers and observers of experiences related to education because they have been students for at least as long as they have been in school. However, a mentor can effectively assist in helping a new teacher make connections between knowledge and perceptions about those experiences and what s/he will experience as a beginning teacher (Moir et al., 2009). This builds on what they refer to as "professional competence" (Moir et al., 2009). They also discuss school culture, the lack of opportunities for reflective practice as a professional educator (Boreen et al., 2009), discuss mentoring of new teachers, and cite co-presenting as an effective method of coaching that "can provide valuable interaction and promote learning of the highest order" (Moir et al., 2009), using current thinking about what is best for adult learners. They note that we have to think about "just in time experiences that are linked to students' immediate needs and related to their drive for success" (p. 47). Making connections, conducting

reflective discussions, and co-presenting serves to build competence, providing those "just in time" experiences, and are at the heart of the opportunities the teacher candidates have alongside university mentors.

Kolb (2015) discusses the development of lifelong learning. He describes it as not just something we aspire to, but a reality given conditions that are created by global, social, economic and technological advances and changes (Kolb 2015). He goes on to say that the individual is largely responsible for this learning based on an individual's multiple roles contributing to a "whole person's development," but that this development "must happen in interdependent relationships with others" (Kolb 2014, p. 334). This aligns with Dewey's (1938) idea of experiences related to educators noting their concern must be "with the situation in which interaction takes place" (p. 45). The candidates were in the process of creating what Kolb (2015) refers to as a professional identity alongside situational interactions with instructors; their identity as a novice educator related to professional learning was forming before completion of the teacher preparation program.

Loughran (2002) discusses becoming a reflective, effective educator and noted that reflection should emphasize questioning and is critical to becoming a competent professional educator. While he is referring to student teachers and how they learn through reflection, this has implications for the study. Our experiences, by themselves, do not lead to learning; reflection is a critical component when it focuses on understanding followed by action (Loughran, 2002). Each of the research participants had multiple opportunities to reflect on what they had learned through coursework, collaborative processes in field experiences, and in preparation for presentations with their instructors. Loughran (2002) discusses "wisdom-in-practice," and how reflection is useful when we are capable of recognizing that we gain knowledge through reflection and have the ability to articulate those reflections to others. This process, in the study, was completed with peers and instructors.

Research Questions

The research questions were framed around professional learning and included:
1. How do pre-service professional learning experiences impact continued undergraduate learning?
2. How might perceptions of self as a future educator change as a result of attending professional learning opportunities prior to becoming a teacher?
3. What are novice teachers' perceptions of pre-service professional learning experiences?

Methodology

Killion (2017) describes a naturalistic method of evaluating professional learning designs which is useful and has applicability to this study. In a naturalistic evaluation, the professional learning is looked at through the lens of "an in-depth analysis of the behaviors, motivation, and attitudes of a small number of participants" (Killion, 2017). And, similar to this study, case study design is how examination of naturalistic evaluation is commonly carried out (Killion, 2017).

Using a case study model, the participants were interviewed in two ways about their professional learning experiences as teacher candidates. Initially, after consenting to be research participants, email surveys were sent to examine each participant's views of the opportunities they were given for professional learning and their perceptions of the impact it had on them. This method of surveying the participants was an appropriate and effective means of collecting data because most of the participants were already in teaching positions, practicums, or student teaching limiting opportunities for face-to-face interviews.

Next, follow-up focus groups were conducted to thoroughly examine participants' views. At the time the focus groups were conducted, each of the research participants had begun teaching positions. The focus groups were conducted through small-group discussions about the professional learning experiences and their impact on perceptions of professional development. The focus groups were held at locations where at least three participants could be present so that one participant's responses to a question fostered further discussion or thoughts from another participant. Three focus groups were held at locations that were convenient to the participants.

The focus group discussion questions were determined after examination and analysis of the initial email survey responses and attempted to thoroughly examine the participants' personal views of professional learning and its impact on the teaching profession. After analysis of the email surveys, the results determined the direction of the focus groups. The focus group questions centered around how research participants felt about preparation for teaching, how professional learning may have influenced their discussions with interviewers prior to being hired for their first teaching position, and how it had prepared them for interacting with colleagues and administrators.

All data were then analyzed including results of email surveys and transcripts of focus groups held with teacher candidates. A qualitative analysis of data was conducted through a case study model.

The Professional Learning Opportunities

The table below gives an overview of the professional learning that occurred for the teacher candidates.

Number of Teacher Candidates	Number of Faculty	Description of Professional Learning
6	3	Presented with faculty and attended state conference: Missouri Council on Exceptional Children Conference: *A Collaborative Environment: Views from Faculty and Pre-service Teachers*
4	3	Presented with faculty and attended national conference: Critical Questions in Education Annual Conference:

		Collaboration between Pre-service Teachers: Faculty Research and Student Views
2	2	Presented with faculty at regional Tango Education Conference: *Collaboration*
4	2	Attended state conference with faculty at Iowa ASCD Fall Academy: *Implementing the Core with Understanding by Design – Planning Units with the End in Mind*
3	2	Presented with faculty at local conference: Creating Connections: Teaching for Learning Conference: *Understanding by Design*
2	2	Co-taught with faculty in social studies methods course
1	2	Co-authored with faculty for international publication
4	2	Co-authored with faculty for state organization publication

Findings

In a personal communication with the author, Hirsh asks, "How were knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors (Killion, 2017) changed because of the experiences the teacher candidates had? Did attending a conference provide a meaningful professional learning experience? What can we expect from attendance and its relationship to improving our craft or practice?" (Hirsh, personal communication, August 24, 2019). As data were analyzed, six themes surfaced from candidates' surveys and focus group discussions. These themes are easily aligned with the knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors (Killion, 2017) that contribute to change. The teacher candidates understood the importance of professional learning, verbalized increased confidence as a result of their experiences, felt confident about communication and collaboration skills, used their confidence to request resources as they entered their first year of teaching, cited their pre-service professional learning as contributing to interviewing skills for teaching positions, as well as helping to carefully weigh which position to accept when offered more than one. The details contributing to each of the themes and the associated knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors (Killion, 2017) are discussed along with poignant quotes from the research participants. Chad's Story follows the discussion of themes. This section explores Chad's journey as a researcher about professional learning, reflective teaching, and co-authoring.

Understanding of Professional Learning (Knowledge). "I have been substitute teaching...Schools where teachers are actively participating in professional learning opportunities seemed to have such a more positive learning environment." ~Gabby

"Gaining early professional learning experiences richens teaching and the understanding of education." ~Katie

"Our professional learning experience topic was on collaboration, and that is now a high priority for me to provide my students with that opportunity because I understand how critical it is in almost any career." ~Rachel

Many teacher candidates have heard negative views about professional learning during practicums, student teaching, and as they enter the profession as a first-year teacher. However, the experiences of the research participants with faculty assisted them in understanding that professional learning is valuable. They mentioned collaborating for presentations, presenting alongside peers and faculty, and returning to campus to share knowledge increased their desire to learn outside of coursework. Understanding discrepancies in the ways that districts support professional learning surfaced in the focus group discussions. The candidates reported using their experiences in other courses they were taking, not just courses taught by the faculty involved in their professional learning.

Increased Confidence (Skills). "I continue to be more confident in my teaching...I feel like that experience held me up to the same standard as experienced teachers which boosted how I viewed myself as a teacher." ~Kelly

"The early professional experiences gave me confidence to be able to speak up, voice my opinion, and dig a little deeper in front of and with my colleagues. I also felt the need to contribute because I am a team player." ~BreeAnn

"Without my experience with these early professional learning experiences, I would not have had the confidence to tell an autism specialist that I did not think his ideas would work in my classroom." ~Alyssa

The candidates identified themselves as learners and, over time, became more confident as such. Identity as a learner was "growing" the candidates as they began to understand that "Learning is intrinsically rewarding and empowering, bringing new avenues of experience and new realms of mastery" (Kolb, 2015). They noted they had applied the skills they acquired from the professional learning, especially during student teaching, and were unafraid to ask questions. During their experiences, they felt valued by their professors, referring to them as colleagues post-graduation, and felt a part of a professional teaching community. Most of the candidates involved in the study are still in contact with their former professors and their current practice, instruction, and classrooms are often featured in courses the instructors are now teaching.

Collaboration Skills (Attitudes, Behaviors, Skills). "At our weekly TLC meetings within our grade-level team, I am able to present new ideas and learn new ideas from my group members that will be beneficial to the classroom." ~Gabby

"I have grown so comfortable and have seen the many positive effects of peer collaboration so often that I do not wish to teach at a school in which such collaboration is not possible." ~Kelly

"All of those things [teaming and PLCs] require collaboration. And since I've had prior experience, I feel like I can just ease right into that position and I know how to collaborate well with others. And how to give feedback without being intimidated with the fact that they're master teachers and I am not yet." ~Emmy

Research participants credited early professional learning for their comfort in collaborating with their cooperating teacher during student teaching. This was a repeated theme as they became novice teachers. They were able, with ease, to speak about relationships and services for special needs students with a variety of faculty (e.g., special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and physical therapists). Amanda noted that during the first year of teaching she was working with seven different staff members to meet the needs of her students. The ability to not only feel confident in discussing students with specialists, but also advocating for them was discussed in surveys and interviews. Alyssa's quote about meetings with an autism specialist appears above. Her confidence in working with another specialist surfaced in her survey. She said, "I work in a school that greatly values tradition, and I understand that these experiences have given me the confidence to suggest ways to teach things in a different way while still maintaining positive professional relationships with my colleagues." All of the participants discussed their roles in "teaming" with colleagues for vertical and horizontal planning and contributing within their school's professional learning communities. They indicated they were able to apply their skills from the professional learning in these different settings and were unafraid to share with others their knowledge and expertise because they "can offer more" and "know what it is like to be a professional teacher."

Communication Skills (Behaviors, Skills). "I knew I was prepared to ask the right questions when I felt unsure of how to appropriately address situations in my classroom. This preparation is what has gotten me through my first year successfully." ~Alyssa

"It doesn't matter if you're first-year [teacher], you've been teaching for 30 years, or you're retired. Your voice is just as important and you can talk and be a productive member of a team. Like what you said, I think all that has to do with being at a conference and speaking out to them, a group of people about what you've done and learned." ~Ethan

"I also presented and collaborated with professors. I think that's helped me build relationships with my principals now. I know how to communicate with them and I know how to listen and work with them." ~Nicole

The research participants repeatedly reported that the early professional learning experiences helped them with confidence in daily interactions and promoted professional conversations with their colleagues and administrators. Each embraced the ability to ask questions of colleagues rather than trying to navigate teaching alone. One participant said that learning to give presentations with peers taught her to talk about facts, not opinions she might have about student learning. Other participants discussed the importance of listening, especially to parents, and recognizing the knowledge they [parents] held about their student outside of school. The new teachers felt they had the ability to advocate, not only for themselves, but for students, families, and colleagues.

Asking for Resources (Behaviors). "I actually re-did my entire classroom this year to accommodate collaboration a little bit better. I took out all the tables and desks, and it's worked really well. And, my students talk better with each other and amongst themselves." ~Rachel

"The collaboration project just gave me the confidence and the ability to know what to ask people for help and who to ask and when to do it, and to know when to stand up for what I believe." ~Chad

"I get comments from my co-workers all the time like, 'Why are you in the administrator's office all the time?' I'm like, '[Be]Cause I'm talking to her about stuff, [be]cause I have things I want to do and I have questions I need to ask her.' It's just going to my administrator and saying, 'Hey, what do you think? Is this a good idea?' Same with how I got guided reading going. I was like, 'I think we need this.'" ~Alexis

Asking for resources as a first-year teacher can seem overwhelming, even daunting. A lot of novice teachers do not know how to ask for resources; this is not something that is taught in teacher preparation programs. The research participants, who had completed a year or more of teaching, indicated that they had gained confidence through professional learning opportunities in their undergraduate program prior to the first year of teaching. After being hired for her first year of teaching, one candidate asked for alternative seating for her Kindergarten classroom after researching her students' needs. And, even though other teachers were not supportive, she persisted and was able to equip her room with seating that benefited her students. Another participant who had completed his second year of teaching asked for the resources he needed to create a more developmentally appropriate classroom environment for his Kindergarten students. Another sought out grants for technology, asked for guided reading materials for her multi-age classroom, and received materials for a new science curriculum that were needed to carry out the lessons.

Interview Skills and Accepting Positions (Aspirations, Skills). "In seeking a job, one of the reasons I want to work in [large city] is because they have built into their structure, professional learning opportunities." ~Melanie

"Why would you want to work for a district that doesn't want you to be improving your teaching abilities?" ~Katie

"I actually brought it up in an interview. I've asked the interviewer how do you support professional development in your school district? And, how do you allow teachers to continue to improve their education while they're teaching to better their teaching for their students? I've just straight out asked." ~Katie

"I asked about professional learning opportunities and that influenced whether or not I would be interested in that district or not." ~Emmy

Three of the candidates were interviewed by the researcher right after they began positions as first-year teachers. In the focus group interview, they were asked about how they used their pre-service experiences to make decisions about positions they were offered as well as assisting them

in responding to interview questions. All three said they were influenced by their experiences and empowered to ask about professional learning in the interview process. They indicated that the learning opportunities they had played a role in decision-making to accept a position. Each had positive views of professional learning and demonstrated understanding of the connection between being successful in the classroom and valuing professional development.

Chad's Story. "After being a teacher for six years, I still believe that collaboration is one of the most important aspects of my job as an educator and advocate for young children, as a professional, and colleague. I feel I have not only embraced collaboration with other staff members, but families, and children as well. My experiences in college as a pre-service teacher and now as a professional have taught me to dig deeper, always stand for what you believe in when advocating for a child, be flexible, be honest, always back your claims with facts not feelings, and keep an open mind, allowing [for] others' visions and experiences. "Collaboration was such a large part of my undergraduate work that it came as second nature when I entered the teaching field. I have even brought some of my colleagues out of their shell and have them looking at experience in new ways.

"Without the collaboration with other teachers, I wouldn't have tried new things and looked at certain issues with an open mind" (Curtis, personal communication, September 30, 2019).

"In my current district, there is only one section of each grade, 98 students in preschool through sixth grade. The students were viewed only through a grade-level lens. When I started teaching, I was the new, young guy full of ideas. It seemed that everyone did their own thing. So, I started emailing, looking for any way possible to connect and work with other teachers. Now I am in year three at my current district, and I communicate with my colleagues daily.

"I am on our Positive Behavior Systems (PBS) team; we are working with students to promote healthy, positive behaviors from all students. We began looking at our kids as a school and not just by grade level. Did it matter that Joe (pseudonym) was in third grade, and I am the Kindergarten teacher? No! 'The old saying *it takes a village* holds true when handling children with emotional scars. Teachers also have frustration levels and sometimes you have to rely on fellow teachers to continue to meet the needs of that child, when they have reached their frustration level' (Fisher, personal communication, October 1, 2019).

"I asked more questions: Could it be that I can offer Joe something his teacher couldn't? Could I be that fresh set of eyes to the situation? Could I be the break the other teacher or student needs? Turns out, the answer to all of these questions is, 'Yes.' In Joe's case, it truly does take a village. Joe's issues are not just a regular education issue, or a special education [issue], or even a behavioral issue. The issue at hand is how are we working as a team to help this student achieve and excel to his maximum potential?
"Collaborating with parents is a vital part of success at school. It's more than just a note in the folder, or a call home. It's about creating a bond to bridge the home and school gap.

"One of the first ways I educate is to first present Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It is not always a case of teaching all 100+ learning standards, it's about creating successful individuals who will be contributors to our future society.

"The students see parents and teachers working together. It creates a great illustration for them. Seeing how important collaborating is helps to reinforce the importance for my students to have these experiences and opportunities.

"It is easy for me to approach any stakeholder in these children's lives. I am able to identify people who can help and be of assistance. It is important to know who to have on your team, what tools to use, and the questions to ask. I am always ready with evidence or research for clams or concerns. 'You, have shared more information with me about my boys in the last 15 minutes than their old school did in the entire time we were there. Both boys are adjusting progressively. They are moving along tremendously!! We find it so impressive how far they have come in such a short time' (Young, personal communication, October 17, 2019).

"I feel that I am always approaching my administrator with ideas to create a better learning environment for the students, opportunities for staff, and ways to bridge that ever-widening span of home-to-school connection."

"'[Chad] is a leader in implementation of classroom collaboration. He is always suggesting ways that we can work together to further the education of our students. He is supportive of his fellow teachers and is willing to share his time and expertise freely" (Sackrey, personal communication, October 1, 2019).'"

Conclusion

Through data gleaned and analyzed from this research, university instructors learned that those involved in curriculum development for teacher candidates have a critical role to play in determining the importance of professional learning opportunities for them prior to entering the field of teaching for the first time. The study revealed positive views and perceptions of professional learning, the impact these opportunities had on increased self-efficacy in the candidates, and how the candidates could be catalysts and advocates for embedding additional opportunities for future teachers in coursework, particularly during classes focused on methods, field experiences, and practicums. Currently, the opportunities for professional learning are limited to faculty who write university grants for professional learning (and these funds are limited and require faculty initiative and effort). However, based on what was learned from the study, faculty can advocate for additional grant monies and involvement of students in research, presentations, and conference attendance with faculty members in the School of Professional Education prior to teaching.

Where Are They Now?

A recent study by Espel, Meyer, and Weston-Sementelli (2019) focused on mobility and attrition in three states (one of the states is where all research participants resided while earning their undergraduate degrees), and they describe teachers who change roles as "movers" or "leavers" (Espel et al., 2019). It should be noted that all of the participants in the study have either stayed in the position for which they were hired or are "movers" (Espel et al., 2019) but are still teaching in some capacity within a public school. None are "leavers" (Espel et al., 2019) defined as a classroom teacher who leaves for a non-teaching position (such as an administrative job), a position in another state, or move to a teaching position in a private school. And, interestingly,

six of the research participants teach in rural settings and are committed to staying in those communities, even though their salaries would be much higher in a metropolitan area.

At the conclusion of the study, each of the research participants indicated an interest in either completing their Master's degree or were already taking Master's level courses. All continue to be educators. While we cannot make assumptions about the early professional learning and these educators staying in classroom teaching positions, it is noteworthy that all but one remain in the position of classroom teacher (one is now a substitute teacher) and that one person is in a teacher-leader position as an instructional coach.

Alexis teaches title reading and math in a rural school district. She is in her seventh year of teaching.

Alyssa is a special education teacher in a mid-sized city.

Amanda taught fifth grade and is now an instructional coach in a mid-sized city that is very socioeconomically diverse. She has completed her Master's degree in educational leadership. She was offered a principal position in a private school and opted to stay in the public school setting.

BreeAnn taught third grade in a small-town rural setting. She is currently staying home with two young children but regularly substitute teaches in the school where she was a classroom teacher.

Chad teaches Kindergarten in a rural school district. He earned his Master's degree in early childhood education immediately after completing his undergraduate degree. He is in his seventh year of teaching. He and his wife, Alexis, remain committed to teaching and living in a rural area.

Cynthia is a special education teacher, working with children who have the diagnosis of autism. She has worked in two large metropolitan districts and is committed to teaching special needs students in urban areas.

Dustin teaches fifth grade in a small community near a very large metropolitan city.

Ethan is a high school special education teacher. He has completed his Master's degree in educational leadership.

Emmy teaches fourth grade in a large metropolitan city.

Gabby teaches third grade in a small-town rural setting.

Katie is a low incidence special education teacher in a suburb of a very large metropolitan area. She has earned her Master's degree in special education.

Kelly teaches fourth grade in a small town and is finishing her Master's degree in literacy.

Melanie teaches fourth grade in a large city; she recently began her Master's degree in curriculum and instruction. Prior to the 2020-2021 academic year, she applied for teaching positions that more closely align with her beliefs about teaching and learning, and she began working at a different school district.

Nicole teaches in a small town, near a very large metropolitan area.

Rachel teaches Kindergarten in a small school in a rural community.

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