Clinical Field Experiences of Nontraditional Pre-service Teachers: Issues and Beliefs

Melanie DiLoreto
University of West Florida, mdiloreto@uwf.edu

Abstract

According to the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE, 2010), effective teaching practices and good clinical experiences share a mutually beneficial relationship. Additionally, according to research reported by AACTE (2010), an important link exists between future P–12 student-achievement and effective clinical practices experienced by pre-service teachers. This case study sought to determine experiences deemed effective or important by nontraditional pre-service teachers while engaged in fieldwork completed in an elementary and/or middle school classroom setting. Four themes were derived from the qualitative data obtained through semi-structured interviews of four junior or senior teacher education students engaged in clinical field experiences. These finding are discussed in this paper.

The purpose of this study was to determine which teacher preparation program experiences nontraditional pre-service teachers find supportive, shape their learning, and provide them with tools that foster effective teaching practices. Specifically, this study explored the experiences of nontraditional pre-service teachers during their fieldwork completed in P – 12 (elementary and middle school) classroom settings. For the purposes of this study, the use of the nontraditional classification for the participants is due to their delayed enrollment in post-secondary education (Chung, Turnbull, & Chur-Hansen, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Each participant was over age 30 during the time of the study. A reported factor demonstrated to positively affect a nontraditional student's success in the classroom involves engagement and service learning (Buglione, 2012). Clinical field requirements typically found in teacher education programs are capable of providing students with such experiences. Additionally, these experiences help construct a bridge between theory and practice (American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education [AACTE], 2010). Consequently, these experiences could be valuable as these nontraditional students formulate and refine opinions, beliefs, and understandings related to educational issues. Indeed, Buglione (2012) reported the importance of course experiences paired with affiliated service work on nontraditional students' academic motivation. Furthermore, research has validated the perceived value of learning skills, building confidence and experiencing a reinforcement of held beliefs as a result of their classes and related service for nontraditional students (Buglione, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

As a member of the faculty at the participating institution, the findings of this study provided three levels of information. First, the findings provided information that could be used to better understand the types of supportive

relationships, as well as the level of support, these nontraditional pre-service teachers desired from both their university faculty and the P – 12 supervising mentors. Second, it provided information concerning what they've learned as a result of having hands-on experiences within the P – 12 setting. Third, it provided information about how their beliefs about standardized testing have been influenced by their P – 12 experiences. Information obtained from the study could then be used to determine whether or not the education programs at their institution were employing identified strategies known to foster supportive relationships that could help nontraditional students succeed in their endeavors to become professional educators.

Literature Review

Clinical Field Experiences

The National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education's (NCATE) Blue Ribbon Panel (2010) suggested that there is not enough research on what makes clinical preparation effective. More research must be completed to support and develop continuous improvement models that foster linking university-based teacher preparation programs and school districts across the nation. Institutions of higher education are criticized for their stagnate approach to preparing future teachers. In order to implement change, policymakers must support funding and facilitate collaboration between universities and school districts. In addition, data must become widespread, public, and available for both practitioners and researchers to determine the effectiveness of emphasizing specific clinical components of teacher preparation programs. NCATE (2010) reported that partnerships need this type of information on a continuing basis in order to trace the progress of their own programs and to make day-to-day decisions that are grounded in data. Sharing these data will promote future research and generate productive discussions and future policies on teacher preparation. NCATE (2010) clearly states that it is not a matter of simply adding the number of hours spent in the classroom, but rather, a fundamental redesign of preparation programs to support blending of practice, content, theory, and pedagogy. According to NCATE's Blue-Ribbon Panel (2010), state policies should provide incentives for such partnerships. Universities should ensure that their teacher preparation programs are treated like other professional programs and get their share of funding in order to support such partnerships for clinical-based experiences. Universities alone cannot accomplish this type of transformation. Institutions of higher education, school districts, teachers and policymakers need to agree on the common goal of improving the effectiveness of teachers in order to improve student achievement.

American Association for Colleges of Teachers Education (AACTE, 2010) stated that good clinical experiences are associated with effective teaching. Research also shows the importance of an effective clinical practice and its link to future student achievement (AACTE, 2010). A well-designed and implemented

clinical practice effectively links theoretical learning to practice and allows candidates to become more comfortable with the process of learning to teach. Additionally, well-designed clinical experiences afford pre-service teachers opportunities to put into immediate practice what they are learning while in a classroom setting and under the watchful eye of a supervising teacher. However, in some instances, missed opportunities to learn to teach have impacted pre-service teachers. Using an ecological approach, Valencia et al. (2009) found that pre-service teachers missed out on many opportunities that could have helped shape them as teachers, improved their teaching experience, and strengthened relationships between the world of practice and the world of academic coursework. At the heart of this were demands placed upon the pre-service teacher, supervising teacher, and university faculty member by various aspects of their positions. In summary, the pre-service teaching experience typically includes missed opportunities to teach, grow in content knowledge, and to develop an identity. Given that a successful pre-service teaching experience has many aspects that should come together in order to foster growth in knowledge and skills associated with being a successful teacher, it is clear that the experience needs to be well orchestrated by and with all stake holders (Valenica, et al., 2009). Bandura's social learning theory accentuates the reliance of observation and modeling in order to learn and make connections.

> Bandura (1977) stated:
> Learning would be exceedingly laborious, not to mention hazardous, if people had to rely solely on the effects of their own actions to inform them what to do. Fortunately, most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action. (p. 22)

In order to be an effective teacher, one must understand how students learn and how teachers should teach. This emphasis on clinical experience supports the constructivist theory in that it provides an opportunity for teacher candidates to construct their own knowledge based on experiencing teaching within the classroom setting, reflecting on their own practice, and connecting it to what they have learned. Through these observations and experiences pre-service teachers obtain the necessary skills and confidence to become effective educators. Pre-service teachers must have various opportunities to practice teaching by exploring, guessing, testing, arguing and proving in order to develop the confidence to effectively teach; therefore, it is recommended that teacher preparation programs provide these experiences for pre-service teachers through well-designed classroom-based clinical experiences (NCATE, 2000; Quillen, 2004).

Nontraditional Students

Nontraditional students encompass a diverse and expanding cohort across college and university campuses nationwide. As such, these students carry distinct needs specific to their individual circumstances that, if fulfilled, contribute to their academic success.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2002), a modest 11% of students categorized as 'highly nontraditional' graduate with a Bachelor's degree. As defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a student is deemed nontraditional if that student has one or more of the following seven characteristics: delayed enrollment in postsecondary education, part-time enrollment, financially independent of parent, work full-time while enrolled, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, or lacks a high school diploma. Students who are identified as having four or more of these seven characteristics qualify as "highly nontraditional". According to U.S. Department of Education (2015), 23.8% of all nontraditional students enrolled in 2011-2012 possessed at least four of these seven characteristics. Of these 2011 – 2012 nontraditional students, 34.2% had a delayed enrollment of one or more years, over 50% were full-time students who were single, independent, and worked at least part-time. Furthermore, enrollment rates have either increased or remained static for students in the age range 25- to 34-year-olds (U. S. Department of Education, 2016).

Buglione (2012) also identified several factors that may hinder nontraditional students' progression toward obtaining a college degree. These factors include limited course availability, part-time faculty, socioeconomic status, financial instability, insufficient day care, and a lack of a social network. Such impediments contribute to the nontraditional student's discomfort and potential deterrence from graduation. Buglione (2012) also found that older nontraditional students often feel somewhat isolated due to age differences between them and younger traditional students. However, when these older nontraditional students believe that they have a "peer-like" relationship with faculty, these insecurities can be mitigated. Nonetheless, research has shown that students typically classified as nontraditional may be better suited to the demands of academic life. Indeed, the age of these students has been associated with characteristics of confidence and satisfaction when dealing with the rigors of obtaining an education and balancing life's responsibilities (Carney-Compton & Tan, 2002; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Furthermore, nontraditional students typically associate the attaining of a degree with improving their living standard, causing them to be more proactive with their education (Donaldson and Graham, 1999).

Another impediment to the nontraditional students' success in academia is a perceived disconnect from the institution itself (Buglione, 2012). However, some researchers have found that social integration does not significantly affect persistence in graduating (Gigliotti & Huff, 1995). Nonetheless, Welcome (2014) identifies academic advisors as playing an important role in mediating the

nontraditional student's successful progression through the multifaceted dimensions of earning a college degree. Furthermore, Blair (2010) found that members of the faculty of the nontraditional students' department can act as important change agents with regards to the development and use of learning environments suited to the needs of these adult learners. Indeed, research has shown that supportive relationships and environments that foster these relationships are key to meeting the needs of nontraditional students (Ross-Gordon, 2003).

Research Questions

Responses to the following questions were sought using a semi-structured interview technique:

1. What types of supportive relationships do nontraditional pre-service teachers believe they have with their university faculty and their P-12 supervising classroom mentors?
2. How do nontraditional pre-service teachers' experiences in P-12 classroom settings impact their beliefs about teaching children from various social or cultural backgrounds?
3. How do nontraditional pre-service teachers' experiences affect their beliefs about standardized testing?

Method

Design

A case study employing semi-structured interviews completed by a faculty member at the university was used to answer the research questions. Although the faculty member did not personally know the participants, they were made aware that personal information and identities would remain confidential and that they could speak freely without repercussions. A convenience sample of four nontraditional junior or senior level pre-service teachers who were enrolled in a teacher preparation program at a university located in the southeast was used. The criteria used for selection of the research participants were two-fold. First, the individuals must have completed a minimum of one field experience (100 clock hours in a P – 12 classroom setting) or observation course (15 clock hours in a P – 12 classroom setting). Second, they had to be concurrently enrolled in an education program at the institution where the study was conducted.

Participants

Each of the four participants completed a minimum of 100 clock hours within a P – 12 classroom setting while two completed more than 250 clock hours in a P – 12 setting. Two of the participants were in the process of completing their first of two required field experience courses while the other two participants were completing their second required field experience course. Two participants

indicated they planned to student teach during the subsequent semester. All four of the participants are representative of nontraditional students with a minimum age of 36. Each of the participants was pursuing a bachelor's degree in teacher education at the time the study took place. One participant was seeking a middle level education degree, one was completing an exceptional student education degree, and two were pursuing elementary education degrees. One participant lived approximately 500 miles from the campus, took all coursework online, and had more than 20 years of experience in private P – 12 settings. The other three participants resided near campus, had only a short commute to the university, and had less than 2 years teaching experience in traditional P – 12 settings. One participant had previously 'home-schooled' her own children and taught religion classes in her local place of worship. All four participants were full-time students.

Data Collection

At the request of participants, the semi-structured interviews took place in different locations. Two of the four semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private room within the university's library. This environment was conducive to interviewing these participants since it was quiet, private, and available at the times requested by the participants. One interview took place on an outside patio of a busy coffee shop located near campus. Although we believe the ambiance afforded the opportunity for the participant to relax; it was extremely noisy and difficult to carry on a discussion. As a result, the audio recording was challenging to decipher, with many distractions throughout the interview. Furthermore, we felt the need to speak quietly so the participant didn't feel as though other patrons were listening to our private conversation. The fourth interview was completed over the telephone. This interview was not recorded because of the lack of a suitable recording device. As a result, a transcript was not compiled. The participant was made aware that paraphrased remarks may be used in the study; however, there would be no direct quotes since there were no transcripts available. Member-checking was completed on all interview notes prior to including them in the final study.

Data Analysis

The responses to questions originally outlined on the interview protocol did not elicit expected responses. Although the participants did answer all questions asked, they did seem more interested in "venting" about university policy, protocol, and specific faculty members. Throughout the interviews, consistent words, phrases, or references used by the participants alluded to support and relationships. Participants were expected to discuss their specific situations in the P – 12 settings that would allow the researcher to develop a theory or hypothesis about the key to success for future teachers. Instead, the participants globalized their perspectives to focus on support, relationships with individuals, and overall experiences.

The transcripts were analyzed and the data were color-coded to create global themes. After further analysis by the researcher, four themes that represent statements from the interviews were developed. These themes are (1) supportive relationships in their teacher-training program, (2) supportive relationships as a characteristic of effective teaching, (3) P – 12 environment and teaching challenges, and (4) standardized testing. Using quotes and paraphrases of actual student responses to the interview questions further develops these themes below.

Findings

Theme 1: Supportive Relationships (teacher training program)

All participants stressed the importance of having a support system present at both the university and within the P – 12 classrooms in which they complete their field experiences. This finding is supported and concurs with the results of previous research (Buglione, 2012; Blair, 2010; Ross-Gordon, 2003). They believe that supportive relationships are the key indicator of a successful teacher preparation program, as well as the foundation for effective teaching. Participants described their relationships within their teacher-training program in both negative and positive terms. For example, one participant stated, "… a big huge thing this university needs to get right is in support, support, support. Any other issues can be handled as long as the students feel like they're being supported. And very few makes us feel that way." The participant continued, "… You know, I mean that's our reality. But we keep telling ourselves it's almost over with. And we never have to deal with this place again..." Just as the participants indicated the need for a supportive relationship with their university faculty, they also described their relationships with their supervising mentor teachers. One participant indicated that she did not have a close relationship with her supervising mentor teacher. She indicated, "…I mean she'll answer my questions but I'm not really seeing it as her wanting to help me as much as she's doing it for herself." In contrast to this participant's relationship with her supervising mentor teacher, another participant stated that she has an excellent relationship with her supervising mentor teacher – "Oh it's excellent. I mean she loves me." These comments and feeling expressed by the participants implicitly answer the question about the types of support and supportive relationships needed. Indeed, faculty supervisors and classroom mentor teachers must develop a relationship that fosters confidence and skill building (Bandura, 1977; Valencia, et al., 2009).

Theme 2: Supportive Relationships (characteristics of effective teaching)

As the participants delved into the description of the qualities of a successful teacher, qualities like showing children that they are cared for, loved, and supported became the underlying foci of the comments. For example, one participant stated, "…You know, you gotta have some compassion. You do have you know that maybe you can't hug 'em or watch out a little bit but ya know if

you want them to learn from you they're gonna respect you and want to trust in you and therefore they may tell you something that they would tell nobody else." Paraphrasing comments from another participant, the key to teaching is that teachers must have a love for what they're doing and for the children. She indicated that kids would forgive teachers for a lot if they know that what happens in the classroom comes from the heart and if they know that their teacher cares about them. She continued by stating that the teachers at the university have lost their love for teaching and they don't seem to really care.

Initial responses from participants regarding the qualities of an effective teacher included dispositional and personality characteristics such as a love for children, making it real, and a love for the job. When probed about effective teacher qualities, all participants commented that effective teaching is a balance of an appropriate disposition for teaching and the skills acquired during a teacher-training program. One participant described knowledge and skill acquisition from university coursework but then indicated the ability to implement those skills depends on personality. For example, she stated, "I've learned that I lean more towards cooperative learning… I came up with the attitude that the noisier they (kids) are, the more they're learning. I learned the technique through, obviously, the classes that I took. But, it really depends on the person's personality." Another participant indicated that there's not one set way to teach. She stated, "What works, I think a lot of that has to do with when you establish rapport with the students, they'll work for you… but you know it's almost like if they have that relationship they can get things out of the kids even if their styles are totally different." These statements are in agreement with the work done by Buglione (2012).

Theme 3: P-12 Environment & Teaching Challenges

All participants discussed the P – 12 environments in which they have been placed. Throughout one interview, one participant described the backgrounds of some of the 15 children in her classroom setting including the fact that 13 of the children receive free lunches and 12 of the children don't live with their parents. She said, "They live with an aunt or an uncle because their parent is in jail or whatever. I'm in a very low demographic school and this plays a huge role in their ability to concentrate on school." The participant explained the difficulties involved in teaching children in these circumstances: "Teachers have to cover the content regardless of the children's home life."

Research supports the idea that teacher perceptions of students are affected by both socioeconomic status and gender (Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008). One participant commented, "It's not a day goes by that kids don't come in there with tears in their eyes because something else bad happened in their life. It's a lot for a little child to have on their shoulders. Then I'm saying well here you've got to learn this, and you've got to learn this at my pace, right now." She continues, "It doesn't work. Right. And you can tell when they've had a rough night because

they walk in with the whole world on their shoulders. And it just breaks my heart…. And you're having to work around that on top of trying to teach them something that when their mind isn't even there. And you can't say ok, well today we're not going to learn anything because everybody's distracted. We'll just put it off until tomorrow. You can't do that because you have all these standards you've got to get through to by the end of the year. Before they start testing these kids and go oh she isn't teaching them anything!"

Theme 4: Standardized Testing

Participants' previous lived experiences seemed to influence their feelings about standardized testing. Two of the four participants' opinions toward testing changed over time as a result of their teacher-training program. One participant's views became harsher toward testing while those of another participant became more understanding of the use of the test data. One participant indicated:

> …Before I was all gung-ho for it until I actually went into the classroom and I was actually able to see the differences. Now it actually makes me angry that they tie those test scores into the teachers and use that for the main sole purpose of whether or not the teacher's good or bad. Because just in the classroom that I had alone there are four students, I'm in the first grade class, and four students can't even read at kindergarten level but yet they are in first grade. So, this teacher not only has to get them to learn first grade stuff, first she has to go back and teach them everything they needed to know from kindergarten to get them on the first grade level. And in realistic time, there's not enough time in the classroom to do that. Their schedule is so regimented that it makes it impossible for her to bring those kids up to where they need to be.

Another participant wasn't as harsh toward standardized testing. She indicated a belief in the idea that the test results are a good tool for teachers and parents. Furthermore, she espoused a belief that the data could provide useful information for use in future teaching. She indicated, "I guess it gives them a pulse on where the kids are…I'm probably not as negative on them as a lot of people are."

Importance and Significance of the Study

The four participants exhibited characteristics that are representative of nontraditional students. Consequently, it may be argued that their responses are consistent of nontraditional students who pursue teacher education as a field of choice. Indeed, they all described confident beliefs in their ability to teach based on their personal experiences, knowledge acquired through university coursework, and the experiences they encountered within the classroom setting. Since two of the participants previously taught (private and home-school settings), they are extremely confident in their abilities and believed they would

be effective teachers. Specifically, they believe they possess both the disposition for teaching as well as the skills necessary for effective teaching. These beliefs were certainly apparent throughout the interviews. These findings are in concert with those attributes of nontraditional students described by Grabowski et al. (2016).

Clearly, the findings of this study closely align with research on the needs of nontraditional students as well as their characteristics. Indeed, these findings are useful in that they add to the existing body of research that defines the views of nontraditional students. Characteristics of these students, along with the perceptions of what and how their needs are and can be met are important factors to consider, especially due to the increasing number of such students. A clear understanding of these factors and their impact on the academic success of nontraditional students is vital in order to ensure that this population is not underserved as they pursue their teaching degrees.

Limitations and Changes for Future Research

A number of participants who confirmed interview times and locations did not show-up for their interviews. This was true even though each participant had selected the location of his/her interview. This lack of commitment may be a researchable artifact and may be related to the age, gender, and dispositions of these no-shows. Nonetheless, the researcher would allow participants this opportunity again; however, quiet face-to-face settings would be encouraged. Finally, the questions themselves would be written to elicit more detailed responses from each participant. Furthermore, probing follow-up questions to extract additional information would be used. Instead of taking each response at face value, questions such as, "What did you mean when you said...? Can you explain what you meant when you indicated...?" would be asked. This type of follow-up may elicit more substantial and honest answers to the questions.

Concluding Remarks

The researcher was familiar with the literature on the multiple variables that influence and help support the success of nontraditional students. Research on nontraditional students' characteristics, academic needs, and challenges was used to both support and assess the findings. This allowed us to classify information about the various experiences of these students pursuing a degree in one of our educator preparation programs. Furthermore, we could use this information to determine whether or not the programs were employing identified strategies known to help these non-traditional students succeed in their journeys to become professional educators. Finally, the research was completed in order to provide faculty who teach in our pre-service teacher preparation programs information about how non-traditional students perceived our existing programs. Information such as that gleaned from this study allows our faculty to be reflective as well as proactive practitioners in the field of teacher education.

Certainly, as the number of nontraditional students increases in general and for those who specifically enroll in teacher education programs, careful consideration will continue to be given in order to help meet their desire and need for supportive relationships as they attempt to increase their knowledge of teaching and improve the associated skills.

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