Program Improvement and Practice: In-Service and Pre-Service Student Teaching Reflections

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Abstract

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Introduction to the Problem

Many schools of higher education continue to look for effective ways to better prepare future teachers for the students they will encounter in the classroom. With an increase in the number of alternative teacher certification programs, some even question the necessity and the value of the traditional student teaching process (Buitink, 2009; Zeichner & Schulte, 2001). While it is unlikely that there is a near end to this educational debate, there is consensus that research should focus on identifying components of high quality programs (Zeichner & Schulte, 2001) and specifically the program characteristics that lead to developing competence in new teachers (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005). Brouwer and Korthagen (2005) conducted an extensive longitudinal study and found that student teachers acknowledged that retrospection and reflection are two essential components for the development of competence (p. 209). The researchers distinguished between "starting competence," which they defined as the outcome immediately following the pre-service teacher education, and "in-service competence", which develops through experience in the field (Brouwer & Korthagen, 2005, p. 210). The authors

concluded with a call for more research to learn about how pre-service programs impact practitioners throughout their careers.

A continuing concern for teacher educators is how to improve effectiveness of student teaching and demonstrate the benefits of this traditional program requirement (Buitink, 2009; Oh, Ankers, Llamas, & Tomyoy, 2005). Reflections on student teaching experiences are important to consider in trying to understand and improve student teaching practice and program effectiveness (Boyd et al., 2008; Fry, 2007). University and public school administrators alike are challenged to incorporate research into their decision making for programs and practices that will improve student achievement. Specifically, for institutions of higher education, any program modifications or redesigning considerations must also document how student learning outcomes are aligned with state and national accreditation standards.

The researchers' desire to learn from current practitioners and improve program impact guided the current study. How do pre-service student teaching experiences influence teachers' perceived effectiveness and teacher efficacy? And how does the student teaching experience help prepare pre-service teachers for their classroom teaching? Given these questions and proposed action research model for self-study, the inevitable limitations of validity related to generalization outside this particular institution and program, as well as researcher bias in data gathering and analysis must be stated and considered in the interpretations of the results.

The survey study was intended in part to support the planning of future research by helping establish the feasibility of conducting a longitudinal case study of program graduates from a small, private Christian university; Regent University. The setting and mission of Regent University also create a unique opportunity to explore these issues in the context of a Christian institution seeking to impact

student outcomes related to faith integration. The Regent University mission is "to serve as a leading center of Christian thought and action providing an excellent education from a biblical perspective and global context in pivotal professions to equip Christian leaders to change the world" (Regent University, 2011). The School of Education, specifically the elementary program under study, pledges itself to transforming education by promoting biblically compatible, research-based solutions to challenges in education through bridging theory and practice, and by building effective partnerships with schools and community agencies (Regent University, School of Education, 2011). Furthermore, two of the nine elementary program outcomes directly address knowledge, dispositions, or skills related to spiritual growth and impact on professional development. The two program outcomes are listed below:

1. Develop self-awareness and an understanding of their own worldview and how that perspective influences their own learning and teaching.

2. Demonstrate intellectual, spiritual, social, and emotional maturity and a professional attitude in relating to and communicating with learners, fellow teachers, school administrators, parents, and members of the community at large.

In light of the limitations of the present study methodology and scope, the research team views this data as preliminary and recognizes that it represents perceptions and self-reports of professional competencies, rather than objective data on professional competencies or instructional practices. These self-reported data, however, offer important information regarding how teachers perceive the links among goals, teaching competencies, academic training, and student teaching experiences.

Purpose of the Study
The research attempted to generate data and describe what student teachers and program graduates consider when asked to reflect on their university student teaching experiences based on their current status in the profession. The purpose of the study was twofold; first, to document what student teachers learned from their student teaching experiences and second, to elicit suggestions for elementary PK-6 initial licensure program improvements based on current interns and recent

graduate in-service experiences. Related to the second purpose, the researchers also desired to document pre-service teacher reflections on how the unique University mission and program outcomes related to faith impact training and professional development.

We sought to answer the following research questions:

A. How will participants describe what they have learned during the student teaching experience based on their current status in the profession?
B. What areas of academic preparation did participants find lacking following the student teaching experience?
C. Did the emphasis on faith integration during academic training influence professional or personal success and why?
D. What are differences in survey question reflections based on current status in the profession (in-service teachers/less than two years vs. pre-service teacher candidates)?

Theoretical Framework/ Review of Literature
Student teaching is considered to be the most significant component of teacher preparation programs (Plourde, 2002; Wilson & Floden, 2002; Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). In elementary education, the PK-6 student teaching experience provides pre-service teachers with opportunities for personal and professional growth in various school grade levels and content areas, and a chance to evaluate and reflect on their own teaching abilities and skills, as well as the effectiveness of their preparation programs. It is during this experience that pre-service teachers practice skills of teaching, learn to design and implement curricular activities, and establish relationships with students of varying abilities and cultural differences.

Although there have been a number of studies directed at the questions posed by the current research, overwhelmingly the majority have been descriptive in nature. While descriptive studies may be limited in their conclusiveness, the benefits of such research far exceed the limitations. Among much of the current research there is a general consensus that practical field-experiences and student teaching are important in learning to teach, yet there is a good deal of disagreement over the best way for prospective teachers to acquire such

experience (Allen, 2003). The findings from various descriptive studies do suggest that solid field experience can have an influence on prospective teachers, which is most often expressed in terms of changes in beliefs and attitudes and not directly linked to teacher effectiveness in achieving student learning (Allen, 2003). Our study is novel in its inclusion of both novice student teachers (pre-service) and in-service teachers and in the exploration of implications for program improvement based on their responses related to beliefs and attitudes.

Methodology
Participants
There were three groups of participants (total $N = 26$), all of whom were elementary education program completers from a private Christian university in the southeastern part of the United States and who had completed 16 weeks of student teaching. There were pre-service student interns still enrolled in their student teaching seminar class ($N = 10$, nine females and one male), in-service teachers or program graduates with a minimum of a year's teaching experience ($N = 14$, twelve females and two males), and two graduates who were unemployed ($N = 2$ females). The participants ranged in age [20-30 years old (42%), 31 years > (58%)], and ethnicity [Caucasian (73%), African-American (15%), Other (12%)]. Half of the group of in-service teachers had a year of teaching experience, and the remainder had either two (29%) or three years (21%) of experience. Participants were identified based on employment proximity to the University, as well as current relationships with the researchers. All participants signed consent forms before the start of the study.

Procedure
Participants completed the initial survey between March and September 2010. Each participant completed the Student Teaching Reflection Questionnaire (STRQ) that was adapted from Chepyator-Thomson and Liu (2003) and administered to the pre-service student teachers during a face-to-face seminar class and to all other participants (in-service teachers) via email. There were a total of 15 questions, six of which required the participant to reflect on the student teaching experience (i.e., to give a broad description of the experience, to discuss academic preparation, to offer advice for future students, to discuss faith

integration, to reflect upon the internship seminar classes, and to offer recommendations for program improvement). The remaining nine questions were for demographic purposes. The complete questionnaire can be found in Appendix A.

The questionnaire was piloted with seven participants and it was determined that the questions were relevant and specific to the academic preparation that the participants received. After reviewing the pilot responses, the researchers added some questions to broaden the scope of the study. For instance, a question about the focus of the internship seminar classes was added, and there were several demographic questions that were also added (i.e., current educational setting, age, ethnicity, gender) for the purpose of exploring possible patterns in subject responses.

After the researchers compiled the initial responses to the questionnaire, it was determined that there was ambiguity in some of the participants' responses, therefore follow-up questions (which were specific to the individual) were sent via email to 13 of the participants. Nine individuals responded to the follow-up questions during September 2010. As an example, one participant, when describing what she had learned during the student teaching experience, initially wrote that the student teaching experience was "valuable." Her follow-up question read: "Review your previous response and after some reflection, please provide specifics of what you deemed as valuable. Did you learn anything about yourself as a person and/or professionally?" Her second response was much more lengthy and substantive:

I thought the experience was valuable due to the many opportunities to learn how the classroom works. My cooperating teachers from both placements offered insight in such things as open house, dealing with parents who were not easy to please, examples of filing systems, and classroom organization.

Data Collection and Analysis
The responses from the 26 surveys were organized by question to create an electronic record of all responses and participant codes. Using constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the researchers searched through the data for recurring themes or events that could be used as categories to further reduce the findings and represent the

documents' contents. New categories were developed or old categories reformulated to account for the diversity in the data until all the data could be categorized or coded into themes. A sample of the coding and response analysis can be found in Appendix B. Due to space limitations, survey responses, associated themes, and frequency for questions 1 and 4 are presented as a sample of theme and response alignment (Appendix C).

Categories were validated through triangulation with survey responses, reflections, and observations of participants during their student teaching seminars. Two additional investigators also studied the participants' responses and separately coded the responses for similarities (excluding the demographic questions). Themes or categories were additionally validated through triangulation with interview follow-up, faculty field experience observations, and response analysis. The trustworthiness of the data was further strengthened with the discussion and eventual agreement of the three researchers' findings with respect to the emerging themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Constant Comparison Method

In our attempt to address concerns associated with descriptive studies and related analyses, the research team followed the recommendations of Fink (2009) and Patton (1990) for the analysis of survey research. The current research began with cross-case analysis of three interviewers, using the constant comparison method "to group answers . . . to common questions [and] analyze different perspectives on central issues" (Patton, 1990, p. 376). Glaser and Strauss (1967) described the constant comparison method as following four distinct stages:

1. comparing incidents applicable to each category,

2. integrating categories and their properties,

3. delimiting the theory, and

4. writing the theory. (p. 339)

As social phenomena are recorded and classified, they are also compared across categories. Thus, hypothesis generation (relationship discovery) begins with the analysis of initial observations. This process is refined throughout the data collection and analysis process, continuously feeding back into the process of category coding. "As events are

constantly compared with previous events, new topological dimension, as well as new relationships, may be discovered" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 58).

Results

The survey data from the original questionnaire and follow-up questions were analyzed as one set of data. Because of the differences in the nature of each question and limited follow-up responses, the number of responses yielded from each question varied. Appendix C highlights survey responses for questions 1 and 4.

Each question is presented in order with both a graphic and brief narrative summary. The cross tabulation graphic not only highlights the dominant themes for each question, but also offers a comparison of responses of recent pre-service interns to those in-service teachers who have some or no employment experience (research question D). Multiple themes within individual response or overlapping themes were counted separately. Themes (and/or subcategory themes) are listed in frequency of occurrence, suggesting the first as the most dominant category or theme among the responses.

Descriptive Analysis

Question 1: How would you describe what you learned during the student teaching experience?

This question produced 36 responses by in-service teachers and 15 from pre-service interns. Six dominant themes emerged from the responses (in frequency order); pedagogy, class management, reality of teaching, overlapping themes, and professional skills. The top three themes are presented in Table 1. All participants shared a belief that pedagogy and classroom management represent the two main components learned from the internship experience. Many in-service participants also shared that while they learned a great deal during the experience, the components of both pedagogy and class management did not come together until they actually were employed and were responsible for a class of their own. One in-service teacher commented, "Regarding classroom management, I learned a lot, but this didn't come together until I had my own classroom that was mine from the beginning of school. Even now, I still have some learning to do." Find additional responses for question 1 in Appendix C.

Table 1 Frequency Theme of Responses to Question 1
Learned Experiences

Table 2 Frequency Theme of Responses to Question 2
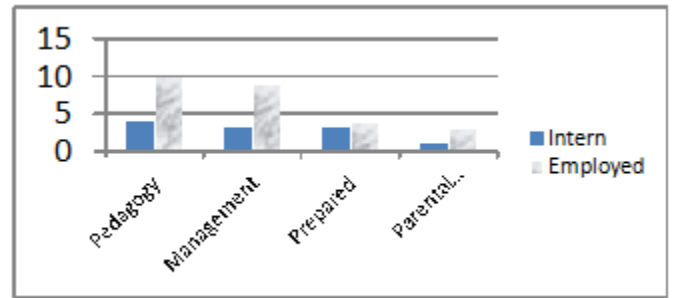*Lacking Areas*
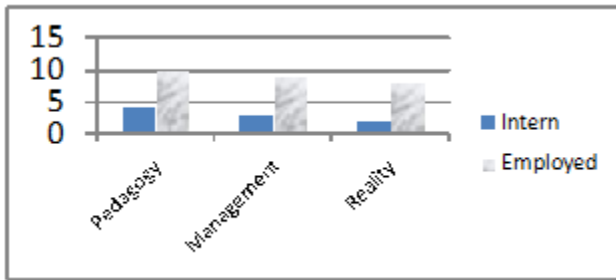
Question 2: Following your student teaching experience, in what areas of your academic preparation did you feel lacking?

Altogether, 37 responses (26 in-service and 11 pre-service interns) were received for question two. The two most outstanding themes describing program weaknesses were class management and pedagogy, in that order of ranking (see Table 2). Participants recognized that they learned much about classroom management and pedagogy during student teaching, but also understood that there was still much to learn.

The top ranking theme, pedagogy, included a broad mix of categories including technology application skills, methods, and strategies for teaching the expansive variety of content required in today's elementary classroom. Furthermore, a close ranking theme emphasized class management, specifically relating to severe behavior challenges and those associated with inclusion practices.

The third ranking response provided some support for the current program model. Specifically, seven participants confirmed that the program prepared them for the demands of the internship experience even when asked to provide program weakness. For instance, one participant wrote, "I do not feel that I left Regent lacking in any area. On the contrary, I believe I gained more knowledge than teachers that were already in the classroom. I have been called a Master teacher multiple times already this school year and it is my first year."

Question 3: *What advice do you have for those preparing to complete a traditional student teaching experience?*

The themes for this question shared a close frequency among both in-service teachers and pre-service interns. Their suggestions ranged from being flexible and having a good attitude to achieving a balance (see Table 3). The majority of the responses that emphasized having a good attitude also incorporated having a positive working relationship with the cooperating teacher and/or university supervisor. The following quote (pre-service intern) provided an example of multiple themes: "Be organized, stay positive, be accepting of all students and teachers, be willing to take on any feedback and try new things."

Within the responses related to the overlapping category, the researchers also identified a subcategory of infusing prayer as a method of maintaining a good attitude. Although no one major theme emerged as dominant, these recommendations are both informative and useful for program planning and intern preparation.

Table 3 Frequency Theme of Responses to Question 3
Advice
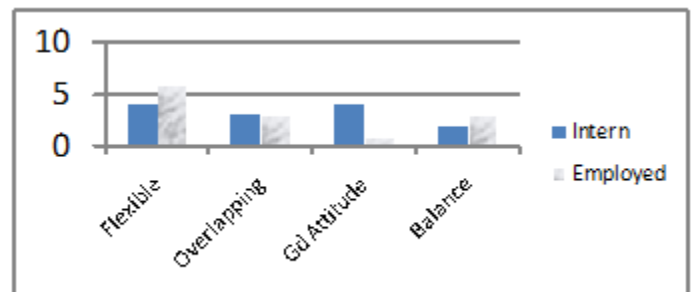
Question 4: *Do you feel that the emphasis on faith integration in your academic training influenced your professional or personal success and why?*

The majority of participants admitted that the faith integration aspects of the program impacted them professionally or personally (see Table 4). Specifically, the top response affirmed that some divine help had impacted them. A close second indicated that as a result of the faith integration, they are more compassionate and loving teachers. However, among the 39 responses, four in-service participants indicated that they were unsure if or how faith had impacted their professional and personal success. Sample responses from in-service participants are provided in Appendix C. The researchers found these particular responses of great interest as this question also aligns with the University mission and national accreditation standards for the current program under study.   Specifically, one participant stated, "No. I think it benefited me as a person, and certainly kept me going at times, but not necessarily as a professional." Another participant commented:

Well… I didn't end up in a school where I can openly share my faith with my students, but the process of trying to see how I would integrate my faith in my teaching did help me to identify ways to minister to my students without openly evangelizing. That is helpful to me personally, but not sure it related to my success as a teacher.

Table 4 Frequency Theme of Responses to Question 4
*Faith Impact*
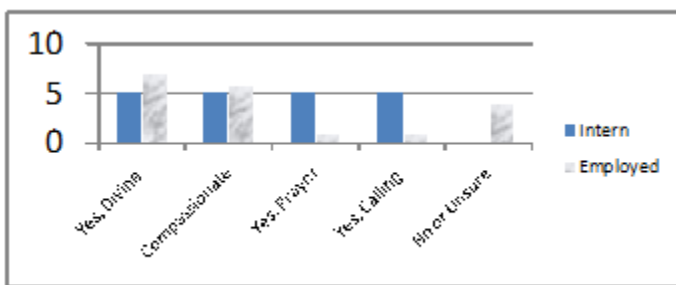
Question 5 (a): What aspect of the internship seminar classes were the most beneficial?

Overwhelmingly, the 22 responses acknowledged that having the opportunity for peer feedback in sharing resources/strategies is the most important aspect of the internship seminar. The second ranked theme of resume writing differentiated a strong preference by recent interns over those in-service teachers. The researchers also gathered several recommendations for future seminar topics including additional classroom management strategies, collaborative planning, job search strategies, and parental conflict.

Table 5 Frequency Theme of Responses to Question 5
Seminar Impact
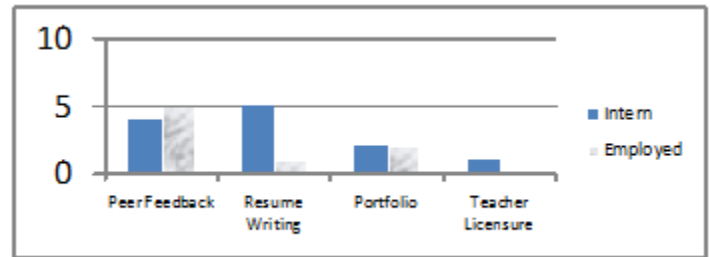
Discussion and Implications
Reflections on student teaching indicated that the overall experience of the internship, in conjunction with the seminar, provided many invaluable learning experiences. As the researchers align the survey results with the original research questions, we can make several statements regarding the research sample and identify implications for program planning and improvement.

As a result of the analysis of questions 1 and 3, we can make the following response to research question A. Specifically, while this study is limited in scope and participant numbers, the greatest reflection from both the recent interns and in-service participants is that the traditional experience does provide opportunities for pre-service teaching candidates to experience the realities of teaching in a public school and develop skills in classroom management and pedagogical skills (related to content knowledge and teaching strategies). In addition, those in-service participants offered similar advice confirming these areas as critical for success in the internship experience. These results are consistent with Allen's (2003) finding that high-quality field experiences, while having no proven link to greater teacher effectiveness, do share common characteristics such as high levels of supervision by well-trained teachers and university faculty and opportunities for prospective teachers to practice skills in pedagogy and management.

A recurring theme among responses reflected that participants at both status levels were surprised to

learn the" reality" of teaching during the internship experience. The researchers must question if this recurring theme indicates that current program clinical field experiences are lacking in opportunities for exposure to actual teaching responsibilities and expectations. This perception may also be the result of the length of the internship period, as one semester may be too short of a window of time for student teachers to fully grasp the complexities of being a classroom teacher.

Based on the analysis from questions 2, 5, and 14, we can respond to research question B. Responses from participants regarding areas of weakness in their academic preparation provided the most significant resource for discussion of program improvement. Participants acknowledged in survey question 2 that after the internship experience, they were more aware of the need for additional training or perceived inadequacy in the same areas they identified as those for which they learned the most (management or pedagogy). A potential explanation is that for the pre-service teacher and novice teacher, classroom management can impact all areas of teaching and perceived effectiveness (Putman, 2009). Furthermore, participants seemed to recognize that these two areas cannot be mastered in a limited 16 week experience and require life-long learning. The traditional experience was an opportunity to evaluate the extent to which the interns possessed or lacked teaching-related abilities and indicated the extent to which program preparation met their needs. Interestingly, neither group of participants mentioned student learning as a top concern for the internship experience or the fulltime classroom experience. Literature informs us that impact of teaching on students will become dominant at a later stage of professional development (Fuller, Persons, & Watkins, 1974).

In response to research question C, the majority of participants were able to recognize a divine influence on their professional and personal success. However, only one participant was able to articulate any specific practices not related to prayer and devotion. As faculty, we were disappointed that given our attempt to demonstrate attitudes, professional strategies and impact of worldview on professional decision making, the majority of the pre-service and in-service graduates were unable to offer similar professional practices for the integration of faith. Responses indicated that they

were required to integrate their faith during classes throughout the program, but could not transfer those skills to any practical skills later in the internship or classroom. Even more discouraging were the four (less than 10%) of the 39 responses that indicated no professional value or uncertainty of the value of the integration component of the program. Certainly the faculty must evaluate our current practices related to faith integration and the transfer of strategies/skills for integration of faith in the public school environment.

Overall, the dominant difference found among participants based on current status in the profession (research
question D) was found in the level of professional and personal reflection as related to the perceived link between internship experiences and professional and personal effectiveness. The more experienced participants were able to articulate concerns and reflections around all research question topics, as well as to provide recommendations for program improvement. The current research would suggest that new teachers and interns require several years of full-time experience to reach a level beyond survival for opportunities in personal/professional skill evaluation. This outcome does support future research and a need for longitudinal study of program graduates and perceived effectiveness related to the academic preparation and internship experiences.

Concluding Remarks and Implications
The study confirmed that during student teaching, pre-service teachers have opportunities to develop classroom management and pedagogy skills, but less chance to enhance practical application of their integration of faith with professional skills. The experience, while a "reality shock" to many, provided a supervised opportunity for transition into the elementary PK-6 real world of teaching.

The second purpose of the present study was to gather suggestions regarding improvement for the teacher preparation program and future internship experiences based on the participants' responses. From an analysis of data collected in the current study and a review of supporting literature, the following implications for program improvement are proposed for faculty consideration:

- Evaluate courses across the program addressing classroom management and content pedagogy to determine depth.
- Evaluate linkage between course content and field experiences. Furthermore, investigate level of actual student engagement in all practicum experiences.
- Review current curriculum in Characteristic of Students with Disabilities and Classroom Management. Additional content and strategies should be added to address more severe and violent behaviors in regular classroom setting.
- Faculty must be challenged to evaluate practical applications of integration of faith for pre-service candidates.

Several aspects of the current program and internship were also affirmed by participant reflections. Specifically, the following aspects of the program were praised and support program goals and objectives:

- Faculty and Intern Supervisors model faith integration within classes and in relationships with students.
- Strong emphasis on pedagogy across program curriculum.
- Peer and faculty support perceived as a valuable component of internship seminars.
- The continued partnership with local school divisions and practitioners in the training process is essential to teachers' success.

As we consider the implications and impact of the study results, any findings must be understood in the context of the limitations. Because this was an action research study, the results need to be treated with caution and cannot be generalized to all teacher preparation programs. In similar settings, the results may provide a direction for future research.

While our research has several limitations, it does provide some guidance for program administrators, faculty, and clinical faculty on a number of issues related to teacher preparation, including the value and impact of the traditional internship experience, pedagogy justified by faith integration, program course relevancy, and the significance of early field experiences. Specifically, the data describing the ability to transfer worldview integration within professional settings prompted discussion among faculty and students regarding terminology and

practice. Consequently, the faculty have agreed to consistently and intentionally use the terminology "faith integration" as it relates to worldview integration within the professional setting. Furthermore, the faculty will strengthen emphasis on how pedagogy is shaped and influenced by worldview or faith. Additionally, the current research adds to the pre-service teacher training literature base with our comparison of two unique perspectives from in-service and pre-service teachers on the value of the traditional internship experience completed in a private, Christian elementary education program.

The recent changes in the Higher Education Act have called on teacher preparation institutions to be more accountable for the performance of their graduates. The revised system of national accreditation has a similar focus on outcomes and documentation of data driven decisions. These changes provide both an opportunity to study the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs and to motivate them to meet the challenge of providing highly qualified teachers for all children.

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Appendix A
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Appendix B
View/Download

Appendix C
View/Download