

The Emergence of Professional Collaborations among Teacher Candidates Participating in an Alternative Practicum Experience

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Abstract

Educators at my institution piloted an alternative coursework-practicum experience premised by the importance of learning communities and bridging gaps between theory and practice, and built by strong alliances between schools and the university. Teacher candidates work in pairs with a co-operating teacher, in small groups at the practicum school with a faculty supervisor, and in a cohort group with university instructors, to navigate beginning experiences as a teacher. This paper outlines some of the research literature that informed the design of this pilot practicum, describes the context and structures of this pilot, and considers some of the qualities of this pilot. A main goal of this paper is to provide an ethnographic account of the various layers of community interactions available to the teacher candidates participating in this pilot practicum. It will be argued that these community interactions were triggered by the structures of the pilot practicum, and fostered deeper professional collaborations among the teacher candidates. The conclusion also considers other successes and limitations of this pilot practicum, and suggests future directions for the program and possible recommendations for teacher education.

1. Introduction

At my institution, the quality of the pre-service teacher education program is under review, with the intent of pursuing a potential reform agenda. Several concerns with the program have been identified, which are also reported in the teacher education literature. Three of these concerns center around the fragmentation of practicum and course work experiences, the desire of teacher candidates to work closely with their peers, and anxiety of teacher candidates concerning solo teaching due to perceived inadequacies to manage a classroom. A pilot collaborative practicum experience was devised, for a small cohort of students, intended to respond to these concerns. The purpose of this paper is to provide an ethnographic account of the collaborative experiences of three pre-service teachers who

participated in this pilot practicum experience. To this end, the paper outlines some of the research literature that informed the design of this pilot practicum, describes the context and structures of this pilot experience, draws on data to illustrate the experiences of three student teachers, and interprets this data in terms of the qualities of professional collaborations. A main goal of this paper is to argue that the various layers of community interactions available to the teacher candidates participating in this pilot practicum triggered deeper professional collaborations among these teacher candidates, and that these community interactions were triggered by the structures of the pilot practicum experience. The paper concludes with successes, limitations, and future directions of the practicum; and possible recommendations for teacher education.

2. The pilot practicum experience

The desire to create the pilot practicum experience was triggered in large part by an internal program review, which surveyed teacher candidates responses to our traditional 2-year (4 term) program. Teacher candidates reported, among other issues, that they experienced a great deal of anxiety concerning their first practicum placement. They are worried that course work is not adequately preparing them for their practicum experiences, about managing the behaviour of children, and delivering lessons for the first time to a classroom of children. Some teacher candidates indicated they appreciated working with peers, as a resource, support, and sounding board for their ideas; these ad hoc collaborations seem to ameliorate potential anxieties. Our survey also confirmed a well-documented concern reported in the teacher education literature, namely a disconnect between university course work and practicum experiences. The teacher education literature suggested possible reforms that would also respond to the concerns of our teacher candidates. This section describes the theory that informed the design of the pilot practicum experience, and the key structures of this pilot.

2.1. Theory informing pilot design

The fragmentation between knowledge learned in university-based course work (theory) and school-based practicum experiences (practice) has received considerable attention in the teacher education literature [1]. Traditionally, practicum is a place where teacher candidates apply what they have learned in university course work, which is problematic because it assumes a one-way linear relation between theory and practice. Increasing attention is being paid to the idea that learning about teaching should be grounded in practice. The contextualities and contingencies of the classroom inform and generate theory, and appropriate practical experiences can bring theory to life. The emphasis of practicum shifts from theory application to a context grounded theory-practice dialectic.

There is increasing evidence in the professional development literature that professional and collaborative learning communities contribute positively to the learning of teachers [2]. These communities foster increased learning opportunities for a group of educators to plan, implement and reflect, where a team is more likely to detect the many ways that teaching impacts learning, and use these observations to further inform their practice. Given a situated view of learning, it is reasonable to suggest that pre-service teachers would benefit from participation in professional learning communities, both with their peers and with other education professionals. In particular, Bullough et. al. reported on the potential of pairing two student teachers with one co-operating teacher, rather than the traditional single-placement [3]. These researchers found partner placements could enrich the practicum placement, in large part due to the value of collaborative learning.

Collaborative action research has been shown to be a highly effective model of professional development, and can be used effectively as part of pre-service teacher education [4]. Key features of this model are cycles of planning, implementation, and reflection; enacted collaboratively; and driven by inquiry into practice. Reflection is an important method for fostering pre-service teacher growth [5]. Further, action research is synchronous with the theory-practice dialectic described above.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, proactive school-university partnerships are a critical element of effective teacher education programs [6]. A recent survey of teacher education programs in Canada suggested that there is a disconnect between faculties of education and the school system, and recommended that universities and schools develop stronger partnership models [7]. Without strong university-school partnerships, it would be impossible to synchronize university course-work and in-school experiences, and build professional

learning communities engaged in collaborative action research. To that end, several collaborative meetings among university faculty and school staff from the host schools (e.g., cooperating teachers, administrators) were used to design synchronized university and in-school experiences. By drawing on the expertise of school professionals, the common perception that theory is solely learned in university and practice is solely learned in school was not reinforced. Several planning meetings focused on key in-school learning experiences that could be facilitated by teachers. These ideas were articulated with professional learning meeting content, university coursework, and designed in-school small-group teaching experiences. During the implementation of the pilot program, continued support was provided to participating school professionals by providing a teacher release time stipend, and soliciting and responding to their perspectives of the program as-it-happens.

2.2. Main structures of the pilot

In an effort to be responsive to the concerns of our students, and to incorporate current teacher education literature into our decision making, a practicum structure was developed based on three features, namely, (1) professional learning communities, (2) team teaching experiences with small groups of students, and (3) articulation of university course work with designed practicum experiences. In particular, the features above make available for teacher candidates various layers of community interactions, including with a partner teacher candidate, a school-based group of teacher candidates, and the entire cohort.

First, professional learning meetings are hosted at each placement school, on a weekly basis during the university term, consisting of approximately 8 teacher candidates assigned to the school, school faculty, and a faculty supervisor. During the weekly school meetings, these groups reflect on practicum experiences or learn about educational issues pertinent to their school placement. These meetings are lead by the faculty supervisor, but often members of the school staff attend a meeting to share their expertise. For example, one school uses a "positive behaviour program" throughout the school, so the first meeting introduced this program to teacher candidates at this school; a subsequent meeting followed-up on the program, where teacher candidates were asked to record specific instances of the program in-action, and the meeting consisted of sharing and reflecting on the observations of teacher candidates.

To reduce the anxiety of student teachers, small group team teaching was emphasized as part of a trajectory toward whole class solo teaching. Teacher candidates are placed in pairs with a co-operating

teacher, and work together or individually with small groups of students. For example, a co-operating teacher could divide the class into centers, with each student teacher leading a centre. Opportunities for teacher candidates to work together with a small group of children were emphasized, especially during the first term, so that they may be better able to observe learning in-the-moment, rather than being solely concerned with classroom management issues (a perceived priority of teacher candidates, which tends to overwhelm all other considerations of teaching).

University course work included assignments articulated with in-school practicum experiences during the weekly school visits throughout the university term. Given the importance of reflection, university course work provided teacher candidates with opportunities for guided reflection on their in-school, small-group and classroom teaching experiences. Teacher candidates worked in pairs to plan for, implement, and reflect on their impact on student learning. This structure was supported by the co-operating teachers, who formed groups of children for the teacher candidates to work with, provided teaching resources, and provided child assessment data to support planning decisions by the teacher candidates. For example, for the math methods course, the teacher candidates worked through 4 cycles, working with the same group of children, observing and reflecting on how teacher actions and children's responses can lead children's numeracy development; the teacher candidates could practice in the school some of the teaching strategies introduced in the course, and share their in-school experiences during university course meetings to inform subsequent planning.

A unique feature of this pilot practicum experience appears to be the various layers of community interactions available to the teacher candidates. First, they work closely with a peer as they plan, implement and reflect-on practicum experiences; and these dyads are mentored by a co-operating teacher. Second, pairs of teacher candidates at the same host school meet regularly to discuss their practicum experiences, guided by a faculty supervisor. Finally, all participating teacher candidates take all university courses together, where there are opportunities to share experiences across schools in relation to the traditional theoretical understandings developed in university coursework. It will be argued that these various layers of community interactions triggered deeper professional collaborations among the teacher candidates.

3. Methodological considerations

When planning for the pilot it was decided there would be no rigorous and well-defined methods for collecting data because of the tenuous nature of a

pilot program. Rather, following one of the key elements of Fullan's framework for effective educational change [8], it was decided to continually seek critical feedback from all participants and stakeholders. To that end, ad-hoc feedback of various forms was collected from various participants concerning the ongoing vitality of the pilot practicum experience (i.e., fall and winter term e-mail solicitations for feedback from co-operating teachers, meetings with school administrators, informal conversations with teacher candidates, minutes of the school-based professional learning meetings, and observations from university instructors and faculty supervisors). As with any pilot and reform initiative, feedback from participants was not uniformly positive or negative, and we sought to respond to concerns as the pilot proceeded, especially with adjustments between the fall and winter term. This feedback-adjust process likely increased "buy-in" by participants, and also led to our desire to look more closely at the experiences of a small number of volunteer teacher candidates. In what follows, the context, participants, and methods are described.

3.1. Context

The cohort of students who participated in this pilot practicum experience enter the teacher education program after the completion of a first degree in Arts or Science. For these "after-degree" students, the Bachelor of Education degree consists of four extended university terms, across two years (fall and winter), alternating between university course work (9 week blocks) and continuous practicum experience (4 or 5 week blocks), as well as one day per week school visits concurrently with course work, and 1 week in the school at the start of the school year. The cohort who participated in this pilot is in their first year of the program, and is in the K-8 stream. Students in this stream focus on K-4 course work and practicum experiences in year one, and grades 5-8 in year two. Along with other courses such as special education and aboriginal education, most course work is divided among subject specific teaching methods courses. Students in the pilot take K-4 Math and ELA methods courses during the fall term, and K-4 Science and Social Studies during the winter term.

3.2. Participants

Thirty three teacher candidates participated in the pilot practicum experience. The odd number of teacher candidates necessitated a single placement with a co-operating teacher, but a dyad placed with another co-operating teacher with a similar grade was available for the solo teacher when enacting university designed practicum experiences. In essence, two co-operating teachers shared three

teacher candidates. At the Christmas break, one teacher candidate left the pilot program, so we were able to reshuffle the placements so that all teacher candidates were paired with one co-operating teacher.

At the end of the fall term, teacher candidates were invited to participate in a research opportunity where they would share their experiences within the pilot. Three female teacher candidates, Kris, Melanie, and Lori, volunteered. All three entered the teacher education program directly from their first degree. Lori was the teacher candidate with a solo placement during the fall term.

It is difficult to argue that these three volunteers are representative of the cohort of teacher candidates who participated in the pilot practicum experience, especially given the ad-hoc nature of ongoing data collection. Ad-hoc feedback from teacher candidates was not uniform. For example, in at least one case, the teacher candidate dyad did not function smoothly due to personality clashes. On the other hand, it appeared that most teacher candidates had similar and positive experiences in terms of opportunities for community interactions, which is the focus of this paper. Although not ideal, there is at least some trustworthiness in drawing conclusions based on the cases of the three volunteer teacher candidates.

3.3 Methods

Ethnography is a research method based on exploring and describing the culture of a group of people [9]. Its premise is that rich and deep interactions with the members of a group is necessary to uncover the hidden beliefs and understandings of a culture. For educational ethnographies, the culture can include a classroom, group of teachers, or other micro-culture of an educational setting. This paper seeks to understand the culture of a cohort of teacher candidates participating in a pilot practicum experience, especially in terms of the various layers of community interactions available to these participants.

Genzuk (see [9]) states that ethnography is based on three principles, (1) naturalism, (2) understanding, and (3) discovery. First, ethnography seeks to uncover natural human behaviour. The author of this paper participated with the teacher candidates in their pilot practicum experiences, as an instructor of one of the university courses, and as a faculty supervisor at one of the host schools. As a participant of the program, strong relationships by the author with teacher candidates was possible, and enhances access to the experiences of teacher candidates. The potential power-differential of an instructor is minimized as the volunteer teacher candidate data used to inform the major conclusions of this paper was collected after the instructor role ended.

Ethnography also seeks to understand human experience, by describing the experiences of participants of a culture, and by endeavoring to avoid misleading interpretations of participant experiences. To that end, an unstructured focus group (during the winter term) served as a main source of data for claims made in this paper. This data is located in the context of the ad-hoc and ongoing general feedback mentioned at the beginning of this section. The general feedback provided a backdrop for validating the specific experiences of the three volunteer teacher candidates. Further, the three volunteer teacher candidates had the opportunity to respond to a written draft of their experiences (after the completion of the winter term).

Finally, ethnography is discovery-based, rather than seeking to test hypotheses. At the beginning and throughout most of the pilot, it was not a research imperative to generate data to support claims concerning the professional quality of community interactions. In fact, initially, there was no research agenda beyond the feedback-adjust cycles already mentioned. Rather, we participated in this experience with sensitivity for both teaching and research, where the decision-making imperatives of each are mutually informing [10].

The focus group meeting with the three volunteer teacher candidates was the primary source of data, where the goal was to understand their experiences during the pilot practicum. Unexpectedly, during the focus group meeting, the participants generated and agreed upon three themes that described the nature and quality of their experience of community interactions during the pilot. Three methods were used to confirm the trustworthiness of these themes. First, the teacher candidates were invited to write about their perspectives after the meeting, and most of the quotations used in the section below are drawn from this writing. Second, the ongoing feedback from various participants provided evidence of a backdrop of consistency with the teacher candidate themes. Finally, the three teacher candidates provided feedback on a draft of section four.

4. The themes of three teacher candidates

In this section, extended quotations of three volunteer teacher candidates (Lori, Melanie and Kris) are provided, which illustrate the nature and quality of community interactions they experienced as part of the pilot practicum. These quotations are organized into three themes: Though placed in differing contexts, a sense of community arose because the teacher candidates faced together the same complexities of teaching (“Oh, I did that too”), examined pedagogy more deeply by critical feedback (“Why did you do that?”), and supported each other through challenging teaching and learning experiences (“I’m not crazy, am I?”). The next three

subsections use quotations from the teacher candidates to illustrate each theme. Finally, although these quotations are drawn exclusively from the focus group meeting with the three teacher candidates, they are consistent with the backdrop of feedback available during the pilot experience, which is addressed in the last subsection.

4.1. Theme 1: “Oh, I did that too!”

The first theme illustrates the shared sense of trust and support experienced by the teacher candidates. Within the dyads, school-based groups, and entire cohort, they felt like they were in it together, and these feelings provided security to face the challenges of learning to teach.

Lori’s comments concern the supportive aspects of working with a partner:

Due to an odd number of students in our cohort, I did not have a partner for most of my school placement during the fall term. I did not have any experience in a classroom prior to starting this program, and so I often doubted myself. Doing the practicum-based parts of the university assignments provided an opportunity to work with my peers, see what they’re doing, and get feedback on what I was doing. Being able to compare notes with other student teachers at my school helped me feel more confident in what I was doing in my placement, and I was able to firm up certain concepts that I thought I was shaky on because I was able to observe my partners successfully using similar techniques.

Similarly, Melanie reflected on the quality of the school-based professional learning meetings:

Having Professional Learning Communities within our school was a huge benefit to the learning environment. On a weekly basis we were able to share stories, daily experiences, and ideas with each other. It was interesting to hear from other student teachers and make connections between what we were seeing in our classrooms and what others were experiencing. It was helpful to hear what other student teachers, from various grade levels, were doing with their students because this provided a frame of reference when trying to understand where my students were at in terms of their development.

Kris aptly sums up this theme concerning the supportive nature and quality of community interactions:

The cohort of student teachers who participated in this pilot program formed learning communities with one another, while applying teaching practices in their school placements. We developed a safe and open relationship with our cooperative teacher, student teacher partner, student teacher school community, and other student teachers in the cohort. The program structure facilitated opportunities for

student teachers to ‘compare notes’ over lunch hour, recess, prep time, and during course time with various other students from our cohort. By sharing our successes, struggles, frustrations, and rewarding moments with each other, student teachers are able to compare and discuss these moments, and find affirmation by the phrase, “Oh, you did that too!”

4.2. Theme 2: “Why did you do that?”

The second theme illustrates the critical conversations that emerged among the various layers of community interactions. Built on the support of a community, the teacher candidates sought to examine their efforts to learn about teaching by questioning the teaching experiences of each other. Kris’ comments illustrate the emergence of critique built on trust:

Prior to entering the faculty of education, both my teaching partner and I had very little experience with early years students. As a result, we formed a close bond that allowed us to share our feelings, questions, and comments about one another’s teaching styles. More specifically, when it came time to implement and reflect on our lessons we often asked each other many “why” questions. Being able to form a trusting relationship with my teaching partner has greatly affected the way I plan and implement lessons, and as a result, I am able to take and receive constructive criticism about my teaching practices more easily. I have formed a quality set of teaching practices that will allow me to continue to critically examine my teaching methods.

Melanie’s reflections continue to focus on the emergence of critical dialogue based on the dyad relationship:

In my case, it was nice to have a partner who came from a different background. Prior to entering education my partner was an Educational Assistant while I worked as a tutor at a Learning Center and privately; therefore I had a repertoire of strategies for teaching certain topics and lessons, but had more limited experience working with special needs students. Together we were able to support each other. Throughout the university assignments and practicum we learned a lot from each other. While I would have ideas and techniques for teaching a lesson, my partner would be able to come up with strategies for dealing with behavioural issues that came up in our small group.

Lori’s comments illustrate the emergence of these critical dialogues as they pertain to the relationship between teaching style and teacher identity:

As student teachers we are trying to discover our personal teaching styles. I know I am trying different styles every time I get a chance to teach on my own,

and sometimes I think it goes well, but having another person there to say “why did you do that?” gives me a chance to review what I did from a different perspective. If I am not able to come up with a good explanation when my peers ask that question, it makes me think about what I did with more depth. I sometimes tend to think either I did a fantastic job or the whole thing needs to be thrown out and redone. A reflection partner tempers my extremist self-evaluations, and enriches my thinking about teaching.

Kris sums up the theme by noting that these critical dialogues were available at all layers of community interactions:

While participating in the practicum experiences and university courses, we were often asked by one another “why did you do that?” This simple question acted as a catalyst for reflection, and allowed us as preservice teachers, to thrive in a healthy and reflective learning environment. The reflections were with other student teachers, our professor, our cooperating teacher, and our practicum advisor, which is a rich context for our educational development and for answering “why” questions.

4.3. Theme 3: “I’m not crazy, am I?”

The teacher candidates distinguished between the general trust and support they experienced from their community interactions (see theme 1), and a specific kind of support they felt when negotiating the social challenges of education, which fostered an environment of risk taking. Lori, for example, reflects on the challenge of negotiating a disagreement with a co-operating teacher (CT):

Sometimes we notice things that our CT’s don’t see, or blatantly disagree with. It can be intimidating to have to discuss things with your CT when they are opposed to your viewpoint. It’s just a fact of life that not all personalities mesh, and sometimes you need someone to turn to in order to verify a viewpoint, especially if you’re in the middle of a conflict. With these partnerships, we have an unbiased alternate opinion to support our feelings, and even legitimize what we are thinking.

Lori continues by noting how the dyad relationship fostered confidence to take a risk:

My CT used data from her divisional diagnostic assessments to select a small group of children I would work with, whom she felt was mid-range in abilities and behaviours. With a partner watching as I did my lesson, I noticed that one student in my group seemed to be highly fluent doing the task at hand. Based on these observations, I suggested to my CT that this student should be placed in a higher-level group. Having a partner to confirm these observations made it easier to go to my CT with my perspective.

Melanie notes the benefits of a partner when facing the challenges of unsuccessful lessons:

It was beneficial to have a peer present during a lesson – one of us to lead the lesson, and the other to observe the children and take note of their abilities and responses. This allowed us to gain a more complete analysis of the lesson. We were then able to reflect together and either celebrate a successful lesson or troubleshoot a lesson that did not go so well. Sometimes when you plan a lesson on your own and it doesn’t go well you feel like you are crazy.

Kris summarizes this theme, noting its relevance to the various layers of community interactions, as follows:

With this pilot project, our student teaching partnerships provided us with the opportunity to debrief after new and challenging situations arose in each of our classrooms. Being able to confide in our teaching partners has provided us with an environment that allowed each of us to take risks and to try new and inventive ways to teach. More specifically, while implementing lesson plans and experimenting with classroom management techniques, our teaching partners and professional learning communities allowed us to communicate with one another and debrief after a day of new and challenging experiences. As a result, our placement schools became a place where we felt safe, took risks, and challenged our partners because our relationships transformed the question “I’m not crazy, am I?” into the statement “We are learning together!”

4.4. Consistency of these themes with other feedback

The themes identified by the teacher candidates during the focus group meeting are consistent with the backdrop of feedback available during the pilot experience. Two observations support this claim. First, adhoc feedback from various sources suggested that many of the teacher candidate dyads worked well together. Many teacher candidates indicated how much they enjoyed working with a partner. Several faculty supervisors and co-operating teachers commented on the high quality unit plans developed by their dyads for the winter term teaching block. Some co-operating teachers, in fact, noted that the dyads were almost too effective, making it harder for the co-operating teacher to build the kind of mentoring relationship they had enjoyed when working with just one teacher candidate. There is adhoc evidence that one dyad struggled to work together, but reports from the co-operating teacher and faculty supervisor suggest that this dyad was able make the relationship work well enough; it may

be that this experience was a valuable experience for these teacher candidates in terms of learning to work with others when personalities clash.

Secondly, the minutes of professional learning meetings were witness to the high quality discussions occurring at each school-based meeting. As the dyads shared their experiences with others, they discovered a shared sense of the challenge of teaching. There was no evidence in these minutes that the dialogue was unhealthy or unsupportive, and there was evidence of some deeper analyses of teaching when the conversations began to notice multiple and diverse, and yet still viable, perspectives. The themes described previously are not contradictory with the apparent quality of professional learning meetings at each school, and provide further support that these community interactions were indeed supportive and sometimes critical. Further, the professional learning meeting minutes reinforce the claim that the themes are evident at all layers of community interactions – supportive, trusting and critical dialogue was available for the dyads, school groups, and the whole cohort.

5. Discussion of the teacher candidate themes

A main goal of this paper is to argue that the various layers of community interactions available to the teacher candidates participating in this pilot practicum were triggered by the structure of the pilot practicum experience, and fostered deeper professional collaborations among these teacher candidates. Student teachers were paired with a cooperating teacher, met regularly with a group of student teachers at the same placement school, and discussed teaching issues, which emerged from practicum experiences, with other student teachers during course time. These structures were put in place in hopes that the learning experiences of teacher candidates would be enhanced. In fact, teacher candidates who participated in this pilot practicum experience successfully participated in various learning contexts/activities, such as comparing teachable moments, reflecting on lesson plans, observing each other, and experimenting with different pedagogies. Coordinating course work with school experiences further enhanced these learning experiences. The learning experiences of these teacher candidates were challenging, and yet still rewarding because they were experiences with others. The nature and quality of these various layers of community interactions appeared to be available to the teacher candidates because of the structure of the pilot practicum experience.

The teacher education literature suggests that professional learning communities should be safe, reflective and critical [11]. That is, members of the community feel safe to share and reflect on their

experiences, and there are opportunities for critical reflections and feedback so that learning about teaching is deeper and richer. The three themes above exemplify these qualities of a professional learning community. The “Oh, I did that too” and “I’m not crazy, am I?” themes illustrate how the student teachers felt safe to learn together. The “Why did you do that?” theme illustrates the emergence of critical reflection and feedback. The “I’m not crazy, am I?” theme also suggests that community interactions fostered confidence among the teacher candidates to take risks in their practicum experiences. Further, all three themes suggest these learning communities, whether at the dyad, school or cohort level, were healthy in the sense that individual students felt safe to be themselves while learning with their peers. In short, the quality and nature of the various layers of community interactions embodied the essence of truly professional collaborations, namely, professional learning communities at the dyad, school and cohort levels.

6. Conclusion

The pilot practicum experience was a success in terms of several criteria, but it was not without concerns and limitations. There are also research based limitations. The conclusion addresses these issues while also considering future directions and possible recommendations for teacher education.

6.1. Successes of the pilot practicum experience

The themes described above suggest that dyad, school-based and cohort-based interactions were supportive, trusting, critical, and fostered risk-taking. The various layers of community interactions are professional collaborations in quality and nature, which was fostered by the structures of the pilot practicum experiences. Consistent with previous research (e.g., see [2]), these professional collaborations fostered rich learning opportunities for the teacher candidates.

Further, some initial and tentative generalized assessments of the program are possible, based on the ongoing feedback collected. The university course work articulations with in-school practicum experiences are a deliberate attempt to respond to the often reported fragmentation between university course work and practicum experiences, and to tap the learning potential of collaborative action research. Ad hoc analysis of some course work suggests that teacher candidates drew on course material to support their work in schools, and that university class conversations driven by in-school observations enriched perceptions of effective teaching. Further, across action cycles, teacher candidate written reflections seemed to shift from

teacher-centered (e.g., management) to student-centered (e.g., child development) considerations, which is consistent with Lowery's research (see [5]) suggesting that integrating university course work with practicum experiences can enhance student teacher's attention to the learning of children.

6.2. Concerns and limitations of the pilot

Strong school-university partnerships was integral to the ongoing vitality of this pilot program. Cooperating teachers were initially supportive because they considered the pilot program to be responsive to their personal perceptions of the inadequacies of their past pre-service teacher education experiences (and for other reasons). These partners continue to be supportive but some of their concerns seem to be contrary to their initial support. For example, co-operating teachers have expressed concerns that too much of student teacher in-school time is designed around university coursework, that there is not enough time for teacher candidates to experience solo teaching, and that they felt they did not develop as strong a mentor-mentee relationship as compared to their past single-placement experiences. The ongoing opportunities for co-operating teachers to provide critical feedback, and our efforts to respond to this feedback, seems to have fostered more buy-in of the pilot program by many of the co-operating teachers. We are hopeful that the continual dialogue of our partnerships will improve the buy-in of all professional participants.

The pairing of teacher candidates triggered several concerns. Managing the experiences of the odd student teacher (Lori) was problematic. Although most student pairs worked well, a few teacher candidates worried that working with a partner would be a crutch to their future learning trajectory because there would be less opportunities for them to experience solo teaching. The co-operating teachers also needed to find alternative ways to work effectively with two teacher candidates instead of one without unduly increasing their workload. We are hopeful that an opportunity for co-operating teachers from all host schools to collectively share their successes and issues concerning working with a dyad will ameliorate these concerns.

Finally, it was difficult to co-ordinate university course work with school experiences. School needs and course work needs sometimes put time pressures on teacher candidates and co-operating teachers. Several co-operating teachers reported concern with not enough time to model their own effective teaching strategies because of the time needed for practicum-based university assignments. We are hopeful that we can work with the partner schools to find a healthy balance between university

assignments intended to bridge theory and practice and the mentoring needs of co-operating teachers.

6.3. Research limitations

The main research limitation is the trustworthiness of the data used to draw conclusions. The ongoing feedback was initially intended as a opportunity for the university to be responsive to participating practicum placement schools. As such, the data is ad-hoc and incomplete. Although there is confidence that the themes reflect the experiences of the three volunteer teacher candidates, it may not be viable to generalize these themes to all teacher candidates as the backdrop data used to confirm consistency of these themes might be incomplete. Next year, the practicum experience will shift from pilot to program, and rigorous data collection methods will be devised and implemented.

Concomitantly with the data limitations above is the depth of interpretation possible for the nature and quality of the community interactions. The paper paints a homogeneous picture of these interactions, with no attention to possible differences within and across these learning communities. But these differences could be important. For example, the identities of community participants is intricately linked with the nature of participation within a community [12]. Careful data collection and analysis may reveal important differences in the degree and types of participation by teacher candidates in the learning communities available to them.

6.4. Future directions and possible recommendations

Going forward, there are at least three considerations for sustaining and enhancing this practicum experience. First, continued responsiveness to the partnering schools, especially the co-operating teachers, is essential. During the winter term, for example, the extent of designed in-school experiences was reduced, in response to co-operating teachers concerns with moving toward more solo whole class teaching experiences for the teacher candidates. Various models of co-teaching (e.g., parallel, stations, team - see [13] for further elaboration) have been suggested, while also encouraging continued opportunities for peer collaboration (e.g., peer teacher feedback, reflection within professional learning communities). Further, the facilitation of team teaching opportunities for co-operating teachers has been proposed, so that they can engage in collaborative professional development, and perhaps experience the benefits of collaborative models for teacher learning, including that of pre-service teachers.

Continued dialogue with the partner schools concerning the potentials and difficulties of this

practicum experience is also essential for enriching the pre-service teacher education pilot program described in this paper. For example, having built strong partnerships, the kinds of experiences that could be essential for teacher candidates can be more deeply considered, to articulate possible trajectories of development of pre-service teachers; a continuation of the disposition that schools are more than sites of practice and that universities are more than ivory towers.

The second consideration is the potential for university content to be taught at the host schools. This structure could foster increased connections between theory and practice because of the potential to enrich course content with the unique contexts and contingencies of each practicum school. It is very difficult for a university course to be responsive to the diverse enactments of educational theory in schools, as each school is different, not necessarily synchronous with theories taught in university, and often implicit within the tacit and unpacked wisdom of school professionals. Despite the best efforts of well-informed university instructors, university course content cannot be shifted into the schools because it has not been brought to life by practice. A course in the school can build on focused observations by teacher candidates of the explicit and implicit theories enacted within the school, engaging in reflections that are personal professional theory building and supported by critical use of educational theory; this brings educational theory to life, so it can indeed inform practice.

Finally, further consideration needs to be given to theory-practice binaries, and to the highly delineated roles of co-operating teachers and other school professionals, faculty supervisors, and university instructors. For example, how could university course work deliberately tap into the expertise of co-operating teachers, school resource personnel and administrators, and faculty supervisors? How could in-school experiences draw on the expertise of university faculty? These questions suggest further exploration of what Zeichner refers to as “hybrid spaces” (see [1]); that is, to legitimize and draw on the understandings of all professionals involved in teacher education, and to shift from binary to dialectical conceptions/enactments of theory and practice. Or, more radically, high quality teacher education programs may depend on erasure of distinctions between theory and practice, and full realization of the varied expertise available among all professionals who participate in the facilitation of pre-service teacher learning.

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