

The Effect of the Professional Development School Experience on a Pre-Service Teacher's Confidence in the Classroom

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Introduction

When a student is in school, math does not stop at a certain time. Math continues into other subjects such as science and social studies. Because it is integrated into so many other subjects, it is very important for students to have a strong background in math. During my first semester of Professional Development School, I got the opportunity to tutor some students who were struggling in their math class. This not only ended up helping my students, but it helped me grow as a teacher, because before the Professional Development School experience in my senior year, I never felt like a teacher at all, yet this was my passion, to become a teacher. This paper is a chronicle of previous experiences, an examination of these, and a study of my progress toward feeling like a teacher of mathematics for elementary age students.

What follows is an autoethnographic study of my transformation. “Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that uses data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context.” (Ngunjiri, 2010, p. 2). I used an analytical approach to examine where in Professional Development School experience I felt a change in perception occur. I examined my teaching experiences prior to PDS, and then I examined the math tutoring project, which resulted in my change from idyllic to realistic.

Perceptions of Teaching

Before I tutored these students in mathematics, I had some pretty Utopic views of teachers. To me, a real teacher is a person who has all the answers. A real teacher is a master of every single subject matter. In my mind, teachers know everything about everything. In the past, I can only remember one time where a teacher said “I don’t know” when I asked a question, and it blew my mind. Teachers always know everything, how could she not know? When I think of teachers, I never thought about the

effort they put into the work, they just magically had fun activities for us to do. I never realized how much work it would take to plan lessons that are relevant to the students and makes each individual successful.

I thought that when I was in college, I would already have so much knowledge, and I would just magically know how to teach. In my past experiences, my teachers had known what to do at all times; yet, when I started my senior year in college, in a program called the Professional Development School, aka PDS 1, I did not feel that same confidence or wisdom that my past teachers had displayed.

Analysis of university courses, prior to PDS

As I examined the education courses that led up to my participation in the PDS, I found some reasons as to why I struggled with my Nirvanic perception of what it means to be a teacher. This examination provided me with a deeper understanding of my development. During EDEE 3320, Foundations of Education: The School Curriculum, we interviewed a current and practicing teacher. I interviewed a fourth grade teacher who had been teaching for five years. Interviewing her helped me put together my idea of what a teacher really is. She thought that when she first started teaching, classroom management was the hardest part of teaching, not actually teaching the curriculum. She told me that coming up with the lessons is not the difficult part of the job, because the district provides so much support.

Looking back, I know that is a good thing, because she gets help writing her lesson plans. However, my original interpretation of her statement prior to the start of my student teaching schedule was that building lessons plans came much easier to her than it did for me. Therefore, I concluded that this must mean that I was far more unprepared to become a teacher than I had thought I was. Luckily,

with experience also came the knowledge that the creation of lesson plans was not some simple benchmark that dictated how effective of an educator I was.

I was always hoping a university class would help me feel more confident about my teaching abilities, but they never did, until PDS experience. Before Professional Development School, my classes did not seem very helpful at the time. In Math 1350, Math for Elementary Educators 1, we learned the concepts of sets, functions, numeration systems, different number bases, number theory, properties of the natural numbers, integers, rational, and real number systems with an emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking. In Math 1351, Math for Elementary Educators 2, we learned the concepts of geometry, probability, and statistics, as well as applications of the algebraic properties of real numbers to concepts of measurement with an emphasis on problem solving and critical thinking. The whole time I took those classes, I was waiting for the moment where it would help me teach my future students these math concepts. Instead of teaching me how to teach, these two math for educator classes reviewed the math class I had taken in high school.

While this was a necessary step in my journey to becoming an effective educator, I became discouraged because these final math courses didn't hold some hidden secret that I had imagined they would. I suppose I assumed that all of my insecurity towards my teaching ability would magically disappear upon the completion of these courses. In a sense, I had set myself up for disappointment and was left discouraged because I had taught myself to believe in unrealistic expectations of sudden enlightenment from these courses. Thankfully, I now understand that this desire and longing I had for confidence in my own qualifications is something that can only be satisfied through hard work in the classroom and dedication to the cause of education.

I took many reading classes at UNT. In the Cross-Curricular Literacy Materials & Resources class, EDRE 4870, we made texts sets. My professor encouraged the people who were the 4-8 math

majors to make a text set about math. She told us that we can teach anything through a book. All the students who wanted to teach younger children, Early Childhood - 6th grade, who had math related text sets ended up having very basic counting or number books.

My goal for integrating literature and math was to find books that helped reinforce math concepts that I will teach in the classroom. For example, I would have loved to have found text that could relate a story or a character to some concepts behind certain mathematical ideas. However, there was a distinct lack of available materials that met the specific type of curriculum that I was attempting to create at the time. Regardless, this is an idea that I have kept with me and fully intend on pursuing in my actual classroom in the future.

Early teaching experience

I felt like one of the most important experiences I had that prepared me for my future in teaching was my part time job. During my third year in college, I worked as a preschool teacher. This was a trial run, the place where I was worked never had a Pre-K program before, and they wanted to see how it would work. So, I started the job with no supplies, and no expectations from my bosses. I worked Monday through Friday from 2:20-6:00 with three through five year olds. I started working as a preschool teacher, not only to have some extra income, but to give me experience with young children. At work, the expectations my supervisor had for me was to supervise the children eating snacks, go outside with the children to supervise them playing, supervise one craft, and organize gym games.

My supervisor made me create lesson plans, but the only thing I would have to fill out was what activity we were going to do and what time we were doing it. We did not have to go into any detail any materials we would need, what technology would be used, content or language objectives, student

outcomes or anything else. My supervisor never made me do math circle time, calendar time, story time, the pledge, or have more than one craft a day, but I felt like it was my responsibility to do those activities with my students. I wanted my students to be fully ready for kindergarten, so these are the extra activities I would have my students do when I taught.

I would start our calendar/circle time by saying the pledge of allegiance, pledge to the Texas flag, followed by a focus on the calendar. We would go over what day it was today, what day was yesterday, and what day tomorrow would be. We would talk about the weather, what it looked like outside, and we would make predictions for the next day. Every day we could add a paperclip to a paperclip chain for how many days we have been in school. The students would also get to add a tally to the “how many days have we been in school” chart. We would then sing and dance to a song about the days of the week, and the months in a year. A student in my class taught me how to say the names of the week in Spanish, so we would also say the days of the week in Spanish after we would sing and dance. We would finish our calendar/circle time with a song about colors and how to spell them.

During our story time, I would read a book with a kindergarten-second grade reading level. I would try to have corresponding craft with each book. Depending on how old the student was/their ability, some students would have to write a sentence or two about their craft in their journals. A long time ago, somebody told me that “patterns are the basis for all math”. So, I would collect buttons, counters, blocks, legos, anything that students could make patterns out of. Every day before they were allowed to have centers in the classroom, they would have to show me at least 3 patterns that were at least 10 pieces long.

The job was a great experience for me. I formed great bonds with my students and their parents, and I got to experiment with the ideas I heard about in my university classes. Although I did learn a lot

about classroom management with my students, I did not know how to teach them. I so desperately wanted somebody telling me what to do, but I did not have that. Instead, I figured out how to be a decent preschool teacher, unfortunately knowing how to teach pre-schoolers basic fundamentals like the colors, and day of the weeks, did not give me the confidence or knowledge to teach upper grade levels math.

The Professional Development School Experience

Then, I started the Professional Development School (PDS) experience. According to NCATE (2001), “Professional development schools are institutions formed through partnerships between professional education programs and P-12 schools.” (p.1) The goal of these schools is to prepare student teachers and teacher candidates through a mixed variety of techniques including challenging settings and structured course design. These institutions are actual, fully functioning schools that have specifically guided coursework to help guide student teachers through an inquiry-based approach. Each of these schools is unique and very different from one another. The variety of different settings and environments truly challenges student teachers and allows for their own growth, as well as the growth of the students they are teaching. “PDS partners are guided by a common vision of teaching and learning, which is grounded in research and practitioner knowledge” (p.1). These amazing schools combine the wealth of knowledge from their staff in order to meet all of the educational needs of the students in the classroom, while also utilizing their shared resources to help student teachers adapt to the learning environment and prepare them to become successful. All of this is accomplished while maintaining the highest of educational standards for both the students in the classroom, and the student teachers.

One way that staff members at professional development schools can often help student teachers ease into the role of teaching, is to create responsibilities and new classroom structures to help share in the responsibility of the students’ learning. PDS partnerships are “committed to providing equitable

learning opportunities for all, and to preparing candidates and faculty to meet the needs of diverse student populations,” (pg 3). The goal of PDS partnerships is a long term one. The focus on relationships, strategies, and roles in the classroom support their efforts in building an educational system that can withstand the test of time. Ultimately, it is even possible for PDS partnerships to share influence in policies and decision-making at even the district, state, and national educational levels.

PDS was a very overwhelming task for me at first. Not only were we in a new school environment, but we also had very rigorous classes. The classes included methods of teaching science, social studies, language arts, and mathematics to young children. Every class had multiple projects that extended beyond class meeting time, requiring long hours of work and research to complete. In my math methods course, we were assigned a tutoring project. We were to transform students who were struggling in math to be on grade level in eight weeks. It was daunting at first.

In class, we learned how to give a diagnostic tests to our students. Based on the diagnostic tests, we were to plan what we were going to teach our students. We were to tutor our students using the Response To Intervention (RTI) model. Every week, we were required to submit our plans by Friday. In our plans, we had to recap all of the learning the students had that week and give specific details as to how we knew learning occurred, talk about what specifically effective about the intervention had facilitated the learning. In addition, we had to talk about what learning occurred for me as an educator that week and give specific details as to how I knew that. Furthermore, we needed to elaborate about the intervention that facilitated the learning, then we also had to recap our plan, stating what worked and why, what did not work and why, what would have made it work even better, and why, and then we also had to include the plans for the next week.

The plan included the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), our introduction to the lesson, the instruction for the lesson, and what practice opportunities we were giving them. In this

section of the weekly planning, we described the planned structured practice where students are guided through the process, followed by guided practice where the students work together, and then independent practice where students are worked by themselves. Finally, we would have to include a game/assessment so we could accurately conclude if the students truly understood the concept.

The RTI model based on the theory that some struggling students have not had sufficient opportunities for learning. It was designed to give students multiple opportunities to learn before referring them for special education testing (Lenski, year, pg 1). According to Riccomini (2010),

“RTI employs a series of instructional tiers with increasing instructional intensity. Within the RTI description, there are several main components, but one especially important component that must be properly addressed is the emphasis on classroom instruction, which includes both content and instructional approach. If instruction for struggling students is not carefully developed and planned, RTI efforts will likely have little positive effect on improving students learning of mathematics” (pg 1).

Reflection on the Tutoring Project

At the beginning of my eight week tutoring project, I faced some challenges. It seemed like other things kept happening during my tutoring time. Spirit squad was at the same time as tutoring, as well as alleged fire drills which actually never ended up happening. Luckily, these challenges only happened during the first two or three weeks, and after that, things settled down. The spirit squad did not have to meet anymore, and they had a real fire drill in a non-tutoring time. Although I personally did not fix these problems, I was so relieved when they were resolved, because I would not have had time to teach the children any material if this had happened for the full eight weeks.

Another problem I faced at the beginning was running out of time too quickly. I was afraid that

the students would not do well if they did not feel comfortable with me, so I put aside time at the beginning to just talk and get to know each other. I am happy that I did that, because I grew very close to the students I tutored. However, the couple of times I did that, I had very little time to tutor, and I would just rush through the lesson. I overcame this challenge by not designating this time at the beginning of tutoring. We would talk when we walked in the hallway to the cafeteria and while I was setting up the table. That was plenty of time to talk about their day and other non-tutoring related things.

Another challenge I had with running out of time too quickly was the students taking too long to get ready for tutoring. We were supposed to have tutoring from 2:10-2:40 every Wednesday and Thursday. When I would come to pick them up from their classroom, they would not be ready to go. I overcame this challenge by telling my students what to expect and bring. I told them that every single week, they would need to be ready to go by 2:10, and they would need to bring a whiteboard and a dry erase marker. This helped a lot, but I still wanted more time. I asked their teacher if I could keep them for the last ten minutes of school, and then I could release them to their after school destinations. She thought it was a great idea, and I always had at least thirty minutes from that point on.

The last challenge I faced was overcome in just a week. The first week of actual tutoring, although I had made and submitted my plans, I had not truly prepared for my tutoring. When it came time for me to tutor the students, I was flustered and nervous. I was reading my lesson plans verbatim, and it did not seem very natural. Fixing this was very simple. I would usually submit my tutoring plans on Friday and then go over them again on Saturday while I made my game and then again the day before I tutored. Going over the content a few extra times made me confident while teaching, and made tutoring run much smoother. As the weeks progressed, going over the plans a few extra times really made me think about the games we would play, and how I could make them more fun for the students. This made me have better content in my lessons, better games, and made the students I tutored enjoy

tutoring even more.

Having challenges that I had to overcome made me grow as a tutor. I also had a few personal epiphanies that made me grow as well. My first major realization was that no matter how old a student is, putting manipulatives in their hand will let them see math in a new perspective. One of my first tutoring sessions, I would talk to the students, and when I asked them if they understood, of course they said yes. I was not too confident in their answers, so I tried teaching again with the base ten blocks, and all of a sudden it was magic. They understood place values, their faces were lit up, and they were so excited they understood. At that moment, I grew as a tutor. I now understood that students will pretend they comprehend to avoid embarrassment. The older students will resist the manipulatives at first, but after they see the magic of it, they will keep using them. In my future classroom, no matter what grade I teach, I will keep manipulatives in the classroom. After tutoring, I am hooked on manipulatives.

Another thing I have gained from tutoring is the importance of having relevant content to students. At the beginning of tutoring, I would try to have an introduction that they would like, but I did not know them well enough to make it relevant. The more I got to know them, the more I knew how to engage them in what we were doing. I started designing my games for Annie and Nino instead of for a group of fifth graders. When my content became more interesting and relevant for them, the more they learned. Understanding the importance of relevance was a very large personal gain I made during my eight week tutoring adventure.

I have learned so much in my eight weeks of tutoring. There are some things I wish I had realized earlier in the process. Some recommendations for myself as a tutor would include tailor tutoring to a child's interest. When a child is interested in a topic, he or she opens up to learning. Another recommendation I have for myself as a tutor is to guide children's learning in a way that they discover answers for themselves. Instead of telling them something, let them play with math manipulatives and

discover the same concept for themselves. Students will truly understand concepts if they teach themselves. Another recommendation I have for myself is to hold very high standards for all of my students. Some things my students understood so quickly, and it shocked me, I need to be able to bump up the intensity of every math concept. That leads into my last recommendation for myself. I would recommend to always plan extra. There were times where we flew through the content, and we had nothing to do besides play a game about a concept they already understood. If I plan for extra, I could just move right along onto the next topic. The next time I tutor students, I will be successful because I will follow these recommendations for tutoring.

In all honesty, I would not change anything about the assignment. Although at first I did not like sending lesson plans and reflections, it helped me very much to sit down and take time to reflect on the week's lesson, and think about what I would do for the next week. Without those weekly emails, I would not have been an effective tutor. Using the RTI framework really helped me with my tutoring project, because it helped me focus on the instructional needs of my students. RTI requires that all instructional decisions be based on the student learning data. It helped me learn what to teach, and what instructional approach to follow..

Me as a Teacher of Mathematics

This project really helped me feel like a teacher because I really got to know my students and I was confident in what I was teaching. Being given the ability to test my teaching skills in the classroom truly instilled a confidence in myself that I value now more than almost anything else that I gained from my university experience. Being constantly exposed to the challenges of actual classrooms immersed my mind in education, so much so that it has very quickly become one of the most important parts of my

life. This experiences has been one that is irreplaceable and I am extremely thankful for having been given the opportunity to better myself as an educator in such a unique and useful way.

The nature of the project forces you to think about it constantly. Because I had to think so deeply about the tutoring I was giving the students, it started to become second nature. I knew what the students would enjoy, what they would like, and how I could get them to understand the math concepts at hand. Teaching them with manipulatives and games also helped us all relax and have fun during the tutoring time. Towards the end, teaching seemed effortless, it was like I had transformed into the teacher I had been dreaming of becoming for so long. This tutoring project gave me confidence, and helped me realize that I am a teacher.

I learned so many lessons from this eight week tutoring project. I learned that scheduling can be unpredictable, and sometimes it seems like there is not enough time to teach. I learned the importance of quick and effective transitions. I learned that the more I think about my week's lessons plans, the smoother the lesson would go. I learned that if I plan thoroughly the first time, teaching will be much less stressful. I learned that students need hands on learning, even if they do not want to use manipulatives. It must be an ongoing effort to continually search for new ways to aid students in need. I learned that students will lie to save themselves some embarrassment. Although it was an overwhelming task at first, I am very thankful for this assignment. It helped the students I tutored get on grade level, and it has provided me with confidence. I learned that students need curriculum that is relevant to them, or they will not give it their all! But most importantly, through my math tutoring project, I learned that not only am I a teacher, but I am an effective one!

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