

Preservice teacher's narratives on the experience of early childhood practicum

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the cognitive processes of pre-service teachers and to suggest ways to shape faith and professionalism as kindergarten teachers by sharing early childhood teaching experiences. To this end, 26 pre-service teachers who have early childhood teaching experience in Gyeonggi-do, Korea, were selected and interviews were conducted with them. A group interview was executed on 6 small-scale groups, each comprising 3 to 5 pre-service teachers. The data were classified qualitatively by content analysis. In this study, preservice teachers showed practice experience that is the flow of story as a satisfaction and dissatisfaction of practicum. Watching the development of satisfaction or dissatisfaction for the practice, it represented that whether it's good or not with the relation between cooperating teacher. Pre-service teachers also represented their resolution and strong will to become a desirable teacher.

Key words: *early childhood practicum, pre-service teacher, cooperating teacher*

Preservice Teachers' Narratives on the Experience of Early Childhood

Pre-service teachers gain their future image as teachers through their practical experience of early childhood teaching, and this is regarded as a valuable opportunity to picture themselves as teachers. Most teachers were educated through apprentice-

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ships, and students of teaching spent their time in school observing an experienced teacher before engaging in their own practical experience (Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005). In this regard, early childhood teaching experience is the most challenging and important opportunity for a prospective teacher and it is regarded as the best opportunity to gain experience within the curriculum of teacher education (Clement, 2002). For this reason, the importance of the early childhood teaching experience has been recognized in recent times and much concern and effort has been directed towards it (Sikula, Buttery, & Guyton, 1996). However, early childhood teaching experience does not always provide positive experiences. The cooperating teacher's role and characteristics, and the environment, atmosphere and program of the kindergarten can all have positive or negative effects on pre-service teachers (Becher & Ade, 1982; Chung, 2003; Lim, 1998; Zeichner, 1986). However, pre-service teachers who have similar education backgrounds cannot all have the same experience in the same situation. Early childhood practicum has an influence according to the unique characteristics and the academic views and beliefs of both the cooperating teacher and the student teacher. This means that the early childhood teaching experience itself cannot lead to new ideas and concepts and may simply lead to confusion in the educational field and cause problems that are complicated and difficult to solve. In the long run, it means that pre-service teachers rely on studying and reflection to understand the teaching profession instead of listening to other people (Clement, 2002; Guyton & McIntyre, 1990; Shin, 2000). For this reason, it is necessary to provide pre-service teachers not only with actual teaching experience but also with the opportunity to reflect on their practicum in order to promote a broad understanding and meaning of the teaching profession. Moreover, it is also important to gain the opinions of pre-service teachers with regard to their experiences. According to studies related to teacher's concerns, opinions, characteristics, etc., pre-service teachers are restless and unsure about their work and they have difficulty with early childhood teaching because they are placed in unfamiliar circumstances and asked to accomplish work that they have never experienced before (Chung, 2003; Denise, 1999; Ricord, 1988).

Studies of the early childhood practicum of pre-service teachers suggest that significant difficulties and conflicts are felt by pre-service teachers in their practical

experience (Ahn, 2005). The causes of these difficulties include emotional disability, fear of mistakes, unease in relationships, conflict from new requests, difficulties in class preparation and high workloads (Kim, 2005), as well as pre-service teacher and educational principles of practice agencies and differing viewpoints to do with policy, and relations with cooperating teachers (Chung, 2003).

However, the study is insufficient in that pre-service teachers feel difficulties and conflict in practical circumstances in terms of how to think and manage. Moreover, studies of methods were quantitatively based, for the most part, on the study of pre-service teachers and there remains a shortage of studies of the concrete practice of on-site experience. For this reason, this study investigated how pre-service teachers interpret and organize the situation and style of educational practice through qualitative analysis. Pre-service teachers increased their professional consciousness through introspecting their educational views and methods and the content of educational activity during their training period. This will also increase the feeling of subjectivity as a teacher.

Research Question

For the purpose of the study the present study addressed a research question as follow:

What is the perception of early childhood preservice teachers on the experience of their practicum?

Method

Participants

This study was conducted with pre-service teachers of A University, situated in Gyeonggido, Korea. A total of 26 pre-service teachers participated in the study, and nine kindergartens were arranged for the pre-service teachers.

Table 1. *General Characteristic for Practice Organization and Practice Cooperating Teacher*

		Total	
organization	Public institution	4	13
	Private institution	8	
	lab School	1	
cooperating teacher	experience	less than 3 years	30
		3 ~ 5 years	
		5 ~ 10 years	
		more than 10 years	
	academic back ground	2 ~ 3 years college	26
		4 years university	
		graduate school	

Context of the Study

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that we, as teachers, each express and learn practical knowledge that is blended in with life when we hear each other's stories and tell our own stories. Small-scale team work facilitates teachers to spontaneously observe and diagnose their teaching activities and behaviors, and discover their merits and issues and implement such discovery in their teaching methods (Yoon, Ryu, & Ji, 2000). In this research, an focus group interview was carried out, of not only recognizing the research subject's insights but allow person to understand the process through which the group constituents reach a conclusion and promote group interaction in such process (Salkind, 2003).

Selecting the study subjects and developing trust with the pre-service teachers was not difficult. Because they were students taking a course given by a researcher. Preservice teachers who were the subject of studies at early childhood practicum often talked openly with each other on the subject of practice. The preservice teachers then completed their early childhood practicum between the first and fourth weeks of May. After finishing the practicum, small group interviews were conducted with the preservice teachers for four weeks in June.

Data Sources and Analysis

Initially, a group interview was executed on 6 small-scale groups, each com-

prising 3 to 5 pre-service teachers, from the first to the second week of June. Subsequently, a group interview was executed on 4 small-scale groups who failed to produce a satisfactory interview, produced an interview with dubious meanings or required a further discussion between the group constituents from the third to the fourth week of June. Out of the total of 10 interviews that were conducted, data from 8 interviews with the exception of 2 interviews that produced lots of unrelated data with the topic of study were used for analysis.

In the focus group interviews, held in an open and unrestricted atmosphere, the pre-service teachers talked about the problems they had felt in their practical experience and listened to the issues of concern and interest of their colleagues. The group of pre-service teachers was divided into smaller groups of three to five people and interviewed accordingly. A total of 8 interviews were conducted, each lasting 120-130 minutes. Moreover, the interviewers controlled the amount of time that each person spoke for and controlled the content of interview so as not to deviate from the subject. In the early stages of the study, it appeared as if there was a participating supplementary relationship because the researcher was in a higher position than the pre-service teachers. For example, in the early parts of the study, some pre-service teachers wanted the researcher leading the interview to propose answers for their issues and anticipated aligning themselves with the story of the pre-service teachers. Group movement was not apparent because it often felt like a one-on-one interview between students and pre-service teachers in the small team. A symmetrical relationship developed between the pre-service teachers and the researcher as the study progressed, and more active discussion took place. Examples of this were learning from practice, difficulties with practice, necessary one becoming real intended practice, a changed view of the teaching profession after practice, and so on.

The entire content of the interviews with pre-service teachers was recorded and field notes were collected to supplement the data. Subject classification and key word extraction was used for the qualitative study. The researcher gave the title with an explanatory subject by repeatedly reading the transcribed copy of collection data to find patterns, subjects and issues that appeared repeatedly. In this study, the category was composed with subject abbreviations of the analysis process. Tied with detailed

category and classified with another subject list after establishing category, executed repeatedly and continuously the subject list of collection data of re-composition process while doing content analysis for each cases. The researcher composed the final contents categories by repeating the re-composition process to find the subject word that best expressed the content. In this way the researcher extracted the main cases, categorized and listed by subject, and conducted the results of the study by analyzing and comparing these cases with the preceding study.

All the contents of interview with pre-service teacher were recorded and field notes were collected for the supplement of the first step and data. Details of the small-scale group interview were recorded and transcribed by the researcher with the consent of the interviewees. Field note and researcher's journal were utilized for the supplementation of coherence in the gathered materials. Moreover, the practicum logs completed by the pre-service teachers during their practicum was reviewed in order to understand the trends in the pre-service teacher's training. The collected data were analyzed through coding, subject categorization and extraction of prominent examples in accordance with the tradition of qualitative research (Spradley, 1980). An attempt to increase the validity of the study during the process of data analysis was made by having the participants, a professional in early childhood education, and 7 pre-service teachers who did not attend the research check one another. Subject classification and key word extraction were used for the qualitative study. Researcher gave title with explanative subject repeatedly reading the transcription copy of collection data to find patterns, subjects and issues that is continuously appeared. Researcher composed final contents category repeating process of re-composition to find subject word which can express the content the most well. In this way researcher extract main cases finally categorized and listed of subject that can express and explain the most well and conducted the result of study with these cases comparing and analyzing with precedent study.

What is the Perception of Early Childhood Pre-service Teachers on the Experience of Their Practicum?

In this study, preservice teachers showed practice experience that is the flow of story as a satisfaction and dissatisfaction of practicum. Watching the development of satisfaction or dissatisfaction for the practice, it represented that whether it's good or not with the relation between cooperating teacher. In this study, preservice teacher's dissatisfaction was concerned largely related to qualification and personality of cooperating teacher. Pre-service teachers also represented their resolution and strong will to become a desirable teacher.

Theme1 : Cooperating Teacher

Some pre-service teachers felt that they experienced unfairness from cooperating teachers. For example, in spite of some cooperating teachers having incomplete class preparation themselves, they demanded strict class preparation from the student teacher. In addition, the preparation was also based on different guiding theories than those learned by the students at their schools, and there were cases of the cooperating teachers overly exerting their authority over the student teachers.

“Why are cooperating teachers doing things their own way not right way, but preservice teachers are compelled to do things right way.”

Some preservice teachers felt heavy burdens placed on them by cooperating teachers in terms of class preparations. In particular, cooperating teachers did not prepare well but required the preservice teachers to have thorough preparation. As a result, preservice teachers expressed their dissatisfaction to cooperating teachers. However, in the progress of the practice, the preservice teachers felt that complete class preparation to preservice teachers is such an express of concern to preservice teacher of cooperating teacher.

I prepared materials based on those of the cooperating teacher, but the cooperating teacher mentioned that, “That is not right. Aren't you? I think the cooperating teacher

made it inappropriate way without consideration.”

(Preservice teacher, Lim)

“What is the extent of the cooperating teacher’s authority?”

Preservice teachers questioned the limits of the cooperating teachers’ authority. In particular, preservice teachers showed strong resentment at the authoritarian attitude of cooperating teachers towards preservice teachers.

The cooperating teacher is 27 years old. It’s nothing; it’s only three years’ difference but the cooperating teacher has excessive authority.

(Preservice teacher, Cho)

As I saw it, cooperating teachers expect preservice teachers to do all the chores as if we were their assistants. On my first day at kindergarten, the cooperating teacher made me clean a water tank and dispose of dead snails left in it, which was actually her job. Two days later, she told me to get rid of two dead chickens left unattended in a box in the classroom for a week. She said that it would help the children to learn something if I involved them in the act of burying it. Picking up the dead chicken, I found dozens of small worms wriggling inside it. The memory makes me shudder even now. It was a great consolation when the children said, ‘Miss Shin should also see this.’ She screamed at the top of her voice at the sight of the worms.

(Preservice teacher, Kim2)

“Theory learned at school is different from practice”

The difference between theory and practice felt by preservice teachers is denied by cooperating teachers because the theoretical content learned in school does not often match actual educational situations. For example, the developmental level and grades of early childhood are evaluated inappropriately. Cooperating teachers feel that a kindergarten teacher should be able to play the piano and clean up a classroom. Cooperating teachers feel that free choice activities are “only playing,” so many classes are offered group activities.

It’s quite different from what is learned at school. We don’t have free choice activities. Let teaching materials set aside from us in order to not taking it out. Children just play and jump about. We asked the teacher how to record this in our practice journal and

the teacher said 'write it as you experienced it.'

(Preservice teacher, Park2)

The preservice teachers discussed the cooperating teacher's theory and the legitimacy of the guidance that was provided. The topic of discussions shifted to why theory and practice are applied differently and the preservice teachers questioned whether theory and practice really are different. In this way, preservice teachers' conflicts between the theory they learned at university and on-site practice is also shown in precedent studies (Ahn, 2005; Yeom, 2003). These explained that the origin of the conflict is that the stressing point of the origin of each teacher's knowledge differed from and originated from the difference in the preferred educational method. It is necessary to balance the needs of the parent against desirable teaching actions and examine the difference between educational theory and practical experience, and the relative importance thereof. Consequently, teachers must not engage in a lose-lose dilemma.

Theme 2 : Preservice Teacher's Resolution and Strong Will as a Teacher

The preservice teachers formed their own ideas of how a good teacher should behave, looking at both the positive and negative aspects of cooperating teachers and exchanging opinions with each other. This shows that even cooperating teachers who act in an undesirable manner can play a positive role by causing preservice teachers to act differently. This includes cooperating teachers who treated preservice teachers unfairly, used improper language to children or failed to run classes from the children's perspective.

"We would like to be treated fairly and should behave properly. "

The preservice teachers felt that they were treated unfairly as cooperating teachers paid no attention to them when talking about a subject or sharing snacks, and expected them to do all the chores. Those faced with cooperating teachers who treated them fairly during their practicum said that such cooperating teachers were a great help. By "good cooperating teachers," they appear to refer to those who helped them prepare for classes, treated them as colleagues, and told them what they could learn

from the practice teaching period.

The lead teacher assigned to me treated me like a colleague and tried to look at relevant matters from my own perspective. I felt comfortable throughout the practice teaching period. She was a really kind-hearted person.

(Preservice teacher, Park)

Preservice teachers also pointed out that teachers should maintain a proper demeanor, which is no less important than their teaching skills. They referred to some examples of bad behavior that are a sign of lack of qualification as a cooperating teacher. Examples included embarrassing a preservice teacher in front of children, behaving deceptively, expecting gifts from parents, and wearing clothes that are not suitable for a teacher.

I think that personality and demeanor are essential qualities for a teacher. Sometimes I wonder what a cooperating teacher has deep in her mind, as she is so deceptive. Such a person appears to make little effort in preparing for classes either. It seems that there is nothing to learn from such a person.

(Preservice teacher, Kim)

“We would like to Respect Children’s Rights”

Some preservice teachers thought that they would never be like their cooperating teachers, who discouraged children from asking questions, made threatening gestures toward them, and showed other attitudes unbecoming of an educator in a class. They also thought that a teacher should respect the feelings of children and interact with them in a way that would help them expand the scope of their thoughts. They pointed to the cooperating teachers who had asked closed-ended questions, made no efforts to arouse children’s interest, or paid insufficient attention to the needs of the handicapped or those in extraordinary situations.

When handing out printed materials, she threw them on the floor and had children pick them up. She stomped her foot on the floor, making a threatening gesture to a child who was not listening to what she was saying. I was scared.

(Preservice teacher, Chung)

I felt that I had to learn many skills, such as how to interact with children, encourage

them to ask questions, and help them concentrate on a subject. These are skills that must be developed over years.

(Preservice teacher, Lee)

Conclusion and Discussion

This study looked for possible ways to make changes in the way that preservice teachers think. This will enable them to take pride in their profession by helping them share their personal experiences in practical teaching with others and providing them with an opportunity for self-reflection. This study had the following findings.

First, Preservice teachers initially blamed the cooperating teachers, who asked them to make thorough class preparations while failing to do the same themselves, forced them to do chores and attempted to exercise their authority arbitrarily. The research of Ahn (2005) and Yeom (2003) showed that an uncomfortable relationship between a preservice teacher and cooperating teacher can cause such a preservice teacher to feel frustrated and present the biggest challenge in practicum, which corresponds to the results of this research. Moreover, there is a high possibility that cooperating teachers' way of managing a class, setting up a class operation plan and addressing children may be copied by preservice teachers (Lim, 1998). The attitude of relevant institutions and the quality of cooperating teachers is likely to have an impact on preservice teachers (Bae, Yoon, & Cho, 1996; Lim, 1998; Yoo, 2005). The quality of teachers at kindergarten have a higher impact on the overall development process of children than those at higher courses of education due to the development characteristics of young children and the specificity of the educational process at that stage (Lim, 1998). Thus, the selection of a good-quality lead teacher for a student teaching course is important.

Second, the preservice teachers eventually felt that the cooperating teachers deserve respect, and that they should reflect on the respective roles of both the cooperating teachers and themselves. Some of them said that they discovered their own faults while interacting with their cooperating teachers and that the actions of the cooperating teachers that they thought undesirable could actually play a positive role

by helping preservice teachers make up their mind not to act in the same way. This helped to form an idea of how a desirable teacher should behave, looking at both the positive and negative aspects of cooperating teachers (including those who treated preservice teachers unfairly, used improper language to children or failed to run classes from the children's perspective) and exchanging opinions with one another.

This can be seen as a transitional process in which the preservice teachers recognize the cause and effect of their behaviors with an active mindset as a teacher more than a mere student. Such result can be said to correspond to the outcome of the research conducted by Yoon et., al. (2000) who studied the process of group training of kindergarten teachers based on introspective reevaluation. In relation to this observation, Dewey (1933) stated that learning takes place through opportunities which allow students to reflect on new behaviors, and Kolb (1984) presented a learning model based on experience and stated that students reflect on their experiences as they set new goals and strategies for learning, and follow through by developing concepts of learning and instruction planning. Therefore, schools and classes require a wide variety of learning communities.

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