How Early Childhood Learning Influences Beginning Literacy Teachers' Professional Learning

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Abstract

Research has shown that teachers' beliefs and personal experiences play a significant role in their professional decision-making and practice, including their experiences as school children. This research study examined how the professional learning of Canadian beginning elementary teachers was influenced by their own early learning experiences in school. Six teachers were observed and interviewed in their classrooms 5 times over the first 3 years of their teaching career. Case studies were developed for each teacher and themes were explored across cases. The findings from this study suggest that pre-service and in-service teacher education programs need to provide teachers with opportunities to critically examine how their early learning experiences influence their professional learning experiences and priorities.

K*eywords: teachers' lives; elementary teaching; professional development; professional learning*

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Introduction

This paper reports on a research study that examined how the professional practice of six beginning elementary teachers in Ontario, Canada was influenced by their early childhood learning. The participants' childhood learning and elementary teaching were explored to examine the ways in which their early learning experiences as pupils influenced their pre-service and in-service education and their resultant practices. The participants' early learning experiences varied greatly as did the ways in which those experiences intersected with their professional learning and teaching practice. The purpose of the study was to explore how the early learning experiences of the beginning teachers influenced their teaching practice. Specifically, this paper looks at how participants' early learning experiences intersected with their formal and informal professional development in the area of literacy

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Literature Review

Teachers around the world begin their careers with a lifetime of memories of their own schooling. However, there has been limited research published on the degree to which teachers' own experiences as school children influence their teaching careers, specifically in the area of professional development. Considerable research has shown that teachers' beliefs and personal experiences play a significant role in their professional decision-making and practice. Teachers' beliefs about pedagogical issues and themselves as teachers are ongoing subjects for research (Lamonte & Engels, 2010; Snider & Roehl, 2007, Uden, Ritzen & Pieters, 2014). This area of the literature includes research on teachers' beliefs about professional development (Beck & Kosnik, 2014; Flores, 2012). A particularly interesting line of research on teachers' beliefs involves the investigation of beliefs about learning and teaching that arise from teachers' personal habits, abilities, and experiences (Benevides & Stagg Peterson, 2010; Johnson, 2008; Nathanson, Pruslow & Levitt, 2008).

   Personal history studies suggest that student teachers use their experiences as students to generalize when interpreting and making decisions about their teaching (Carter & Doyle, 1996). Carter and Doyle (1996) recommend that teachers' personal history narratives be given a prominent place in teacher education, because if left unexamined, new teachers are likely to perpetuate conventional practice. Furthermore, Wolf, Fallentine and Hill (2000) argue that to respond to the needs of their students, pre-service teachers need to examine their beliefs and learning history. Feimen-Nemser (2001) considers teachers' schooling and early teaching experience to be far more influential than the typical pre-service program. She states, "The typical pre-service program is a weak intervention compared with the influence of teachers' own schooling and on-the-job experience" (p. 1014). This study elicited teachers' perspectives on how their learning histories were implicated in professional learning over their first three years of teaching.

   Research illustrates that many teachers have had negative learning experiences in elementary school. With respect to literacy, many have poor attitudes towards reading and do not engage in much reading for pleasure (Applegate & Applegate, 2004; Nathanson, et al., 2008; Sulentic-Dowell, Beal & Caprano, 2006). There are some studies (Asselin, 2000; Johnson, 2008; Sunstein & Potts, 1998) that point to pre-service program initiatives that may help address negative attitudes including having pre-service teachers write and analyze their literacy learning stories, create literacy portfolios or engage in reading response activities. Although there is a growing body of research on teacher stories and teacher life history (Carter & Doyle, 1996; Wolf et al., 2000), very little has been written about elementary teachers' early literacy stories, both inside and outside of school There has also been little written about

how these early experiences influence their understanding and teaching of literacy. Of the few studies that do address teachers' early literacy learning (Johnson, 2008; Nathanson et al., 2008; Sunstein & Potts, 1998), the focus is on pre-service teachers.

One of the early learning experiences that may have an influential role in teachers' practices is their many years as witnesses of their classroom teachers. This is what Lortie (1975) calls the "apprenticeship of observation" (p. 61). He argues that pre-service teachers' many years as students provide them with a type of apprenticeship into the profession in that they have observed and interacted with teachers for many years before entering their teacher preparation programs. Their individual experiences with particular teachers inform their image of teaching. However, because of their perspective as students, they are not privy to teachers' goal setting, preparation, or analysis (Lortie, 1975). Moreover, they do not, "perceive the teacher as someone making choices among teaching strategies" (Lortie, 1975, p. 63). Lortie was concerned that teacher preparation does not do enough to dispel the individual, simplistic, and often traditional notions of teaching with which many new teachers enter the profession (Lortie, 1975). Loughran (2006) exhorts teacher educators to help preservice teachers overcome these limitations by allowing them to "see and hear the pedagogical reasoning that underpins the teaching that they are experiencing" (p. 5). He argues that making the tacit knowledge of teaching explicit (Loughran, 2006, p. 9) is essential if preservice education is to move from "teaching as telling" to "teaching for understanding" (Loughran, 2006, p. 10).

Darling-Hammond (2006) further argues that in addition to their "apprenticeship" experiences in teaching, preservice teachers bring other personal attributes and experiences that may get in the way of learning to teach effectively. Ironically, one of these may be their strong academic ability. It may be more difficult for teachers with a history of high academic achievement to support student learning because they have few personal experiences of academic struggle (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Bullough and Gitlin (2001) remind us that pre-service teachers, as well as practicing teachers, always filter what they learn through "a set of biographically embedded assumptions, beliefs, or pre-understandings" (p. 223). Bullough and Gitlin (2001) caution that "Ignoring the past does not make it go away. It lingers, ever present and quietly insistent" (p. 223).

Teachers' professional learning, both pre-service and in-service, has been a long-standing interest of educational researchers. Shulman (2005) claims that teacher education programs in the United States are in "chaos" (p. 7) due to a lack of in-depth and systematic preparation, supervised clinical practice, and rigorous assessment. Ball (2000) decries the "fragmentation of practice" (p. 241) due to the lack of integration of subject matter and pedagogy. Kosnik and Beck's (2008) study of beginning teachers revealed that they had learned "disconnected bits of information" (p. 124) rather than the knowledge and skills necessary to teach elementary literacy. They called for re-organizing pre-service education around priority areas (Kosnik & Beck, 2009). In their longitudinal study of teachers (Beck & Kosnik, 2014), they reflect on the ways that teachers to continue to grow through both formal and informal learning during their careers.

Several researchers (e.g., Day & Gu, 2010; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Flores, 2012; Munby, Russell & Martin, 2001) affirm that teacher professional learning continues long after pre-service. At both the pre-service and in-service stages, teachers' personal experiences with the education system play a role in what and how they learn professionally (Lortie, 1975; Darling-Hammond, 2006). Given the impact of teachers' experiences, assumptions, and beliefs, it is imperative that more attention is paid to teachers' learning lives in pre-service and in-service education.

Methodology

This study was designed to explore the perspectives of beginning elementary teachers with respect to the influence of their early personal learning history on their professional learning in literacy. A case study approach was used. The purpose of case studies in qualitative research, according to Patton (2002), is to "gather comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information about each case of interest" (p. 447). A qualitative research approach was chosen because it matched the goals of the inquiry. Since this research was seeking to understand this from the participants' perspectives, a qualitative approach was most appropriate (Patton, 2002). Data was collected in the teachers' classrooms, their 'natural setting', in an attempt to understand the meanings that the participants brought to their work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Bogden & Biklen, 1998). The research approach allowed for collection of information from the participants' perspectives and gave them an opportunity to reflect on their learning and teaching.

Multiple case studies, with each of the participants constituting a case, were developed, and then themes were explored across cases. The data was then organized by specific cases in a way that was in-depth, holistic, and context sensitive (Patton, 2002). The stories of six beginning elementary teachers each formed a case, and the six cases were compared and contrasted. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis. Each participant was observed while teaching in his or her classroom and interviewed five times over three years. The goal was to explore the "big picture" of the teachers' early learning context and teaching context. In addition, the details of specific early learning experiences, beliefs about learning and teaching, and specific teaching strategies were explored. The research questions guiding this study were:
   a. How do beginning teachers draw on their early learning experiences at home and as pupils in their work as teachers?
   b. How does the relative ease with which they learned literacy as children relate to the way in which they approach learning about teaching literacy as beginning teachers?

Participants

The six participants in this study were self-chosen from a group of 22 beginning elementary teachers who were already participants in a larger longitudinal study of literacy teachers. An invitation was sent via email to all of the beginning teachers in the larger study. The participants were the first six to respond to an invitation to be part of this study. All teachers were graduates of the same large urban university post-baccalaureate pre-service program and were in their first year of elementary classroom teaching in the same large urban centre. The teachers all taught at urban schools which differed in terms of size and the socioeconomic and cultural makeup of their neighbourhood. They were all classroom teachers of grades ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 8. Four of the participants were female, and two were male. Their ages ranged from 23 to 40. For half of the participants, teaching was their first career (ages 23, 23, and 24). For the other half, teaching was a second career (ages 30, 32, and 40). In terms of ethnicity, two were Asian and four were Caucasian. Pseudonyms are used, but the gender is correct.

Data Collection

In this study, six elementary classroom teachers were interviewed individually in May 2009, in March and May of 2010, and March and May of 2011, during their first, second and third years of teaching. Interviews took place in their classrooms after the researcher had observed them teaching. The teachers were also asked to provide samples of documents related to teaching and learning such as school district curriculum guidelines, teacher resource books, program plans, and lesson plans. The use of these three data collection methods, interview, observation, and document review, allowed for triangulation of the findings (Merriam, 1998).

The semi-structured interviews in the first year asked general questions about their experiences as first-year teachers. The interviews in the second year focused on the participants' early childhood learning at home and transition to school. For the interviews in the third year, the participants were asked to reflect on similarities and differences between their early learning and their teaching. The participants reviewed their transcripts and case studies and provided feedback to the researcher. These main data sources were supplemented with field notes and emails between the participants and the researcher over the course of the 3-year study.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using data analysis methods drawn from Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Transcripts of interviews, observation notes, and field notes were read several times during and after the 3-year period of data collection. Each piece of data was identified by the participant, data type, and date. After the first round of interviews and observations, a process of "open coding" began (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). Events and ideas were labeled and then grouped together into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As the study progressed, "axial coding" was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 96). Using the analytic principles of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), connections were made between categories to develop larger themes. A chart was created for each participant listing the emerging themes and the data that supported those themes. A common set of categories was created for the individual case studies which encompassed the main findings in the study. Following the creation of charts for the data on individual participants, another chart was created which compared and contrasted the themes from the six individual case studies. For the purpose of this report, interview data is the focus.

Limitations

This study is small in size, with only six participants. While this allowed for the collection of rich, in-depth data, it restricts the generalizability of the results. Moreover, the participants had many factors in common. They all attended the same teacher education program and taught in the same city. However, the participants' childhood learning experiences were quite diverse as were the types of schools and neighbourhoods in which they taught. The ratio of female to male participants (4 to 2) may over-represent the presence of male teachers, who are a significant minority in elementary teaching. The open-ended nature of the interview questions in the study resulted in significant variation in the participants' answers. This limited the ability to compare their responses directly, but did allow for a complex picture of the ways in which the participants' early learning intersected with their early teaching.

Findings

Nine key findings from the study will be described in this paper, four related to pre-service learning and five related to in-service learning. They were chosen because they were strong themes that arose from the analysis of the six participant case studies. The findings from this study revealed that the teachers who struggled with literacy learning as children found pre-service literacy instruction presented more of the same problems, while those who excelled at literacy learning as children found pre-services literacy courses to be enjoyable, if limited. All of the teachers considered the practical teaching component of their pre-service education to be more helpful, yet they still felt unprepared to teach literacy in their own classrooms. In-service learning, both formal and informal, was reported to meet more of the participants' professional learning needs due to the range of topics and contexts available to them. Interestingly, those who struggled with literacy as pupils and pre-service teachers engaged in the most in-service learning in literacy and reported the most satisfaction with teaching literacy. The participants who found literacy easy and enjoyable both as pupils and pre-service teachers engaged in relatively little literacy in-service learning and found teaching literacy challenging.

       Early Literacy Learning Functions as a Filter for Pre-Service & In-Service Learning.
The following table summarizes the findings from the individual case studies. In Table 1 below, the six participants' experiences are organized according to their early home literacy experiences, early school literacy experiences, response to pre-service education, and approach to in-service education.

Table 1 *Early Learning and Teaching*

Name of Participant	Kelly
Early literacy experiences at home and in the community	- Parents were classroom teachers - Lots of reading and writing by adults and children - Dramatic play with sisters - Included in dinner time conversation - Regular library visits
Literacy experiences during elementary school	- No challenges academically or socially - Confidently reading and writing by Grade 1 - Entered a Gifted program in Grade 4 - Won a creative writing award
Grades taught in first 3 years of practice	- Grades 6, 7, and 8 Physical Education and Health - Grades 6 and 8 Math and Language
Response to pre-service professional learning in literacy	- Enjoyed theory in course work - Found course work lacking in practical applications - Practice teaching helpful but did not relate to teaching assignments - Could confidently discuss literacy planning, teaching and assessment

Approach to in-service professional learning	- Engaged in little literacy PD relative to other subject areas - Took a mathematics AQ course - Literacy PD through resource books and internet sites - Rarely referred to ministry or school board literacy guidelines - Used memories of own early teachers as role models - Did not feel as confident in literacy teaching as other subjects
Name of Participant	Mike
Early literacy experiences at home and in the community	- Mother was a school librarian - Lots of reading and writing by adults and children - Grandfather wrote stories with grandchildren as characters - Included in dinner time conversation - Regular library visits - Involved in community theatre
Literacy experiences during elementary school	- No challenges academically or socially - Confidently reading and writing by Grade 1 - Switched to Arts focused school in Grade 4
Grades taught in first 3 years of practice	- Combined Grade 2 and 3 class - Combined Junior and Senior Kindergarten
Response to pre-service professional learning in literacy	- Enjoyed the theoretical aspect of coursework but felt it was overdone - Wished there was more of a theory/practice balance - Appreciated the focus on critical and multiliteracies - Practice teaching placements did not match his teaching approach - Felt confident about literacy teaching after pre-service
Approach to in-service professional learning	- Very little PD in literacy - PD in the form of professional reading on learning theories - Referred to math resource books but not literacy resource books - Used memories of own early teachers as role models - Did not feel as confident in literacy as other subjects
Name of Participant	Darren
Early literacy experiences at home and in the community	- Both grandmothers were teachers - Lots of reading and writing by adults and children "one room school-house" - Included in dinner time conversation - Included in mother's weekly discussion group - Involved in church and community music

Literacy experiences during elementary school	• No challenges academically or socially • Confidently reading and writing by Grade 1
Grades taught in first 3 years of practice	• All grades from Kindergarten to Grade 8 as long term occasional or daily supply teacher
Response to pre-service professional learning in literacy	• Enjoyed teaching/learning theory • Valued the emphasis on supporting children's interests • Wanted more explicit instruction on how to teach • Practicum placements gave him an understanding of what teaching was "really like."
Approach to in-service professional learning	• Very little PD in literacy • AQ in Special Education • Used other teachers in the school as mentors • Tried to recreate own early learning experiences • Less confident in literacy teaching than in other subjects
Name of Participant	Kendra
Early literacy experiences at home and in the community	• Little reading or writing by adults or children • No dinner time conversations • Did not attend community programs • Parents believed that school would take care of literacy learning • Spoke some English before school
Literacy experiences during elementary school	• Difficulty adjusting to school routines and co-operating with other students • English language learning a challenge • Higher level thinking skills more challenging than basic skills
Grades taught in first 3 years of practice	• Grade 4, all subjects other than French & music • Grades 7 & 8 English, Math & Science
Response to pre-service professional learning in literacy	• Frustrated by 'talking head' approach to coursework • Wanted more tools and strategies • Wanted more hands-on learning experiences in coursework • Practicum placements most useful and satisfying
Approach to in-service professional learning	• Most PD in the area of literacy teaching • Engaged in every literacy workshop that she could find • Used other new teachers and established teachers as resources • Amassed a variety of literacy teaching strategies form a range of sources • Used memories of own early learning as inspiration • Felt most confident and satisfied with literacy teaching

Name of Participant	Gail
Early literacy experiences at home and in the community	• Father read to himself, mother, not a reader, little reading to children • Parents rarely wrote, but grandmother was a regular letter writer • Little dinner time conversation • Active in sports and arts activities in the community • Parents expected her to do well in school
Literacy experiences during elementary school	• Strong lower level skills such as spelling and decoding • Disliked reading • Difficulties with reading comprehension • Difficulties with oral presentations
Grades taught in first 3 years of practice	• Junior and Senior Kindergarten
Response to pre-service professional learning in literacy	• Literacy coursework interesting but insufficient • Wanted more strategies on teaching reading • Wanted to learn more about language development • Did not agree with the teaching approach in her practicum placements yet found them an 'invaluable' experience • Most worried about teaching literacy
Approach to in-service professional learning	• Engaged in a great deal of literacy-related PD • Was an 'intern' to an experienced teacher for a year • Consulted professional and resource books and internet sources on literacy • Own early learning informed approach to PD and teaching • Felt most confident and satisfied with literacy teaching
Name of Participant	Rachel
Early literacy experiences at home and in the community	• Grandfather and uncle were teachers in Hong Kong • Parents read to themselves and the children in English and Chinese • Parents attempted to teach her to read in English and Chinese • Little dinner time conversation • Regular library visits • Studied piano
Literacy experiences during elementary school	• Difficulty learning to read in French, English, and Chinese (at Chinese school)

	• Frustrated by learning to read and "gave up." • Difficulties with spelling and organization in written work • Difficulties with reading comprehension
Grades taught in first 3 years of practice	• Grade 4 and Grade 5 Extended French program (half-day in English, half day in French
Response to pre-service professional learning in literacy	• Frustrated with transmission-style teaching in coursework • Wanted more opportunities to see strategies modeled and to practice them • Wanted more feedback on her lesson plans • Did not agree with the teaching approach in practicum placements and did not get enough support or feedback
Approach to in-service professional learning	• More PD in literacy than other subjects • Preferred informal PD through resource books and experimentation • Did not have a mentor and consultants were frustrating • Used own early experiences to inform PD and teaching • More satisfied with her literacy teaching than other subjects

The six participants in the study all attended a one-year post-baccalaureate pre-service program at the same large urban university. Although they were in different cohorts, with four qualified in the primary/junior division while the other two qualified in the junior/intermediate division, their formal preparation for teaching was comprised of similar elements: university-based instruction comprised of methods and foundation courses, and practice teaching placements in elementary school classrooms. The participants also shared another similarity. All six felt that their pre-service program left them unprepared to teach elementary literacy. However, the ways in which they experienced their literacy preparation in pre-service differed. Their experiences appeared to be influenced by their early literacy learning as children. In the first part of this section, the pre-service university-based and classroom-based experiences of the participants who struggled with early literacy learning, Kendra, Rachel, and Gail, will be discussed. This will be followed by an examination of the pre-service university-based and classroom-based experiences of Mike, Kelly, and Darren, who did not face any struggles with literacy learning as children. Finally, the in-service experiences of all of the participants will be analyzed. These experiences include the learning and support offered to them through induction programs offered to new teachers, and the in-service opportunities offered to all teachers. While all six participants' experiences are represented in each theme, one longer participant case narrative has been included in each theme to give a fuller picture of the influence of early learning on beginning teaching.

More of the same for those who struggled with literacy. The three participants who struggled with aspects of literacy learning in elementary school, Kendra, Rachel, and Gail, faced similar challenges in their pre-service literacy course. They were frustrated by the large-group, transmission-style teaching approach used by their pre-service literacy instructors. Rachel's story illustrates this phenomenon. Rachel felt that the literacy learning challenges that she had as a child resurfaced in her pre-service program. She experienced her pre-service literacy course as a great deal of verbal instruction with few opportunities to see the recommended teaching practices modeled or to practice them herself. As she explains:

> The idea of sitting and just discussing and watching things about teaching, but not just getting in there and getting your hands dirty, it's like the link wasn't there. How could you learn to do something when you are not doing it?

In addition to wishing that she had more modeling and practical experiences in her literacy course, she also wished she had more feedback on how she could improve her lesson plans. Her experiences in her pre-service literacy course reminded her of her challenges as a young student. In both situations she was unsure of her teachers' expectations, the relevance of the learning activities, and her ability to succeed at the assigned tasks. Her pre-service literacy experience reminded her of her childhood and led her to make a commitment not to teach her students in that way. She says, "It was frustrating, all that sitting and listening. It made me remember what it was like as a kid and how I don't want to teach my students that way."

Practice teaching more helpful. It is not surprising that Kendra, Gail, and Rachel found the practice teaching components of their pre-service program more satisfying, given their preference for active, contextualized learning. Gail, for example, valued her practicum placements over her university-based instruction during pre-service. She said, "The placements were invaluable in terms of the pre-service program. I mean, that's where I feel like you do all your learning if you have a good partnership with the teacher in the classroom." One of her placements, in a Junior and Senior Kindergarten, corresponded to the grades that she taught in her first three years of teaching. Gail appreciated being able to observe and participate in the day-to-day planning and delivery of the kindergarten program. Although she did not seek to emulate every aspect of the teaching practices that she witnessed in her classroom placements, Gail found all of the experiences useful in helping her to decide how she wanted to conduct her classroom. As she said, "It was all useful. I can still remember the good things that I saw there and the bad things that I saw there."

Pre-service literacy course interesting but limited for strong literacy learners. For, Mike, Kelly, and Darren, who learned school literacy with ease as students, pre-service literacy courses posed no academic problems. They were interested in, and enjoyed, the theoretical aspects of their courses. The traditional and de-contextualized teaching approach that distressed the first three participants was not viewed as an impediment to their learning. However, they did consider their university-based courses to be lacking in the practical application of literacy teaching concepts. Mike's response was typical of this group of participants. Mike appreciated the theoretical perspective that his literacy instructor taught in his pre-service literacy course. He explains:

> My pre-service literacy instruction was conceptually really interesting, like the whole critical, multicultural literacies and the idea that kids come to literacy instruction with all different backgrounds and those backgrounds need to be addressed. All of those things, I agree with.

As a student in school, Mike enjoyed learning about new ideas and was comfortable with abstract concepts. As a pre-service teacher, he was equally at home with a theoretical approach to

learning in general, but in his literacy course, he found this approach to be insufficient. Mike believed that theory and practice needed to be more balanced in the literacy course. His experience was that theory was more heavily weighted. As he said, "I'm someone who likes theory, but the balance was tipped, over tipped in favour of theory." Mike found his pre-service literacy course "practically irrelevant" in terms of learning how to teach reading and writing to young students.

Practicum is helpful but insufficient. Like the first three participants, Kelly, Mike, and Darren found some of the "how" that was missing from their pre-service university-based literacy instruction in their practice teaching placements. However, for a number of reasons, they did not learn enough about teaching literacy to enable them to confidently implement their own literacy programs in the first three years of their teaching.

For Kelly, the classroom placements were highlights of her pre-service year. Kelly appreciated how well organized the teachers were, the positive relationships they had with their students, and the support they received from their administration. However, because there was little overlap between her practice teaching classrooms, and her teaching assignments in her first three years as a teacher, they were not as much of a practical resource in her teaching as she would have liked. Kelly had expected to teach mostly Physical Education and Health classes when she was hired to teach full-time, but in her first few years, she taught mostly Math and Language courses. Rather than using her placement experiences as models, she modeled her teaching of these subjects after her experiences in the Gifted program when she was a student. It is interesting to note that the participants were far less critical of their pre-service mathematics courses. They felt that there was more of a balance between theory and practice and that they felt more ready to implement a mathematics program in their classrooms.

In-service learning fills some of the gaps left by the pre-service program. As we have seen, the participants all felt unprepared to be literacy teachers when they began to teach full-time, whether they found the university-based portion of their pre-service frustrating or interesting, and whether they found their classroom-based practice teaching somewhat or very helpful. Their experiences with in-service professional learning, either as part of their school and board's induction program or as part of the more general professional learning options, however, were more successful in helping them to develop and implement their classroom literacy programs. Four of the six participants in the study were involved in the Ontario province-wide induction program for publicly funded schools known as the New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP). Gail and Darren were not involved in this program because they do not teach full-time in publicly funded schools. NTIP is comprised of three elements, orientation by the school and school board, mentoring by experienced teachers, and professional development and training. New teachers are also required to have two teacher performance appraisals within their first 12 months of teaching (Kane, 2010).

Because of the variety of in-service learning opportunities available to them, the participants were able to choose the type of learning that met their needs as learners and as teachers. Specific induction opportunities, Additional Qualification courses on a variety of subjects and topics, and workshops offered by their schools, the school board, or the Ministry offered many ways to continue their professional learning. Self-directed professional reading in print and online, professional learning communities, classroom experimentation, and mentorship relationships also allowed the participants continued their professional learning after beginning their teaching careers. This range and quantity of learning options were not available in their pre-service program.

In-service learning provides a wide range of learning options. The six participants took advantage of a wide range of in-service professional learning options. Those who struggled with

literacy learning as pupils engaged in mostly literacy related options. Perhaps this was because they reported being nervous about teaching literacy, a subject that they had not excelled at as pupils. The participants who did excel at literacy learning as pupils took relatively little literacy professional learning opportunities as teachers. This may have been due to the confidence they felt about their literacy abilities.

Of all of the participants, Kendra took advantage of the widest variety of in-service opportunities. In keeping with how she learned best as a student, she put together a range of practical activities that met her needs in the classroom. Through connecting with former pre-service classmates, teachers at her current school, and her formal mentor, she amassed practical strategies and resources that she could put to immediate use in her classroom. In addition, she attended all of the induction workshops that were offered to her over her first three years, as well as many other workshops, almost exclusively in literacy. Furthermore, she regularly consulted a wide range of print and electronic teacher resources when planning and implementing her literacy program.

In-service learning offered in a variety of learning contexts. In-service learning was also offered in a variety of contexts, from large group formal courses to one-on-one mentoring, to individual reading. Gail, who thrived on small group "real life" contextualized learning, was most fortunate in being hired by an independent school that provided year-long internships for its new teachers. Gail was able to work alongside an experienced teacher for a full school year, participating in all aspects of planning, teaching, assessment, and communicating with parents. When she began to teach her own class the next year, she felt much more prepared than the other participants. In a similar way, Mike, who described himself as always having been a "book person," continued his professional learning in a way that suited his learning style. Over his first three years of teaching, he read a great deal of professional books on his own and with a school-based teacher book club, but very little that related to literacy.

Personalized learning options available. The participants were also able to personalize their in-service learning. For example, Darren was able to meet his desire to know more about special needs learners by taking an Additional Qualification course right after graduating from pre-service. Because school learning had always been easy for him, he felt comfortable enrolling in an additional formal course right away. His satisfaction with this course led him to take another Additional Qualification course in Drama the following year. Rachel, on the other hand, was so dissatisfied with her pre-service program, as she had been with much of her elementary schooling that she did not want to enroll in any more formal professional education. She preferred to learn more informally through teacher resource books and experimentation.

Problems with in-service learning. Although there were many types of in-service opportunities available to the participants, whether within their induction program or outside of it, the system was not perfect. For example, the participants often found that their assigned mentors taught different subjects or grades than they did, and they often did not have common planning time. These factors meant that the mentoring relationships were not as fruitful as they could have been. Furthermore, because the participants felt tired and overwhelmed in their first few years, they often lacked the energy to attend off-site workshops, seminars, or courses. Moreover, the Additional Qualifications courses are very expensive, at approximately $800 each.

Rachel, who perhaps felt the least prepared to teach literacy when she began her career, was least well served by in-service learning. As a student, she was most successful when her teachers used a structured approach with close guidance and frequent feedback. Unfortunately, as a new teacher she was hired to pioneer a new Extended French program without adequate structure

and guidance. Rachel had no role models or mentors in the program, as she was the only person teaching in the program in the first year. She attended one literacy workshop, but found it unrelated to her immediate needs, and so did not attend any others. In addition, she found the literacy consultant who was responsible for her school to be vague in her instructions and unhelpful in her feedback. If Rachel had been able to do an internship in an existing program, as Gail did in her first year, she may have had a much more satisfying in-service learning experience.

Discussion

Pre-service professional learning

All of the participants found their pre-service literacy program to have insufficiently prepared them for classroom teaching, and their in-service learning to be more practical and effective. However, the ways in which they responded to different aspects of their pre-service and in-service professional learning differed considerably. The early literacy learning struggles and strengths of the participants appear to be factors in how they responded to professional learning opportunities. Those who struggled with literacy learning as students continued to struggle with the university-based pre-service literacy courses. Those for whom literacy learning came easily as students found the university-based pre-service literacy courses interesting and enjoyable, if less practical than they would have liked. All of the participants found the classroom-based practicum placements in elementary classrooms to be at least a somewhat more helpful in preparing them to teach literacy, but only the participants who had had successful literacy experiences as students were able to use their childhood experiences to supplement what they learned in practicum.

Like the participants in Kosnik and Beck's study (2008), these participants felt that they had learned "disconnected bits of information" (p. 124) rather than a coherent approach to teaching literacy. All of the participants also seem to have suffered from what Ball (2000) calls the "fragmentation of practice" (p. 241) in their pre-service program. They were taught theory in their university-based courses, and had the opportunity to observe and participate in the practical aspects of pedagogy in practicum placements. However, the two experiences were not integrated in a way that enabled the participants to, "make use of content knowledge with a wide range of students across a wide range of environments" (p. 246). The participants' lack of preparedness to teach literacy effectively in their first few years reinforces the argument of the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (2009) that Canadian teacher education programs are not sufficiently exposing pre-service teachers to the large body of knowledge regarding how to teach children to read, how to identify children who are struggling readers, and how to effectively intervene.

In-service professional learning. The wide range of topics and contexts, and the opportunity to personalize their learning were seen to be strengths of their in-service professional learning by all of the participants. They appreciated the fact that they had a greater ability to choose the type of learning that met their individual needs than in their pre-service program. The in-service learning choices that the participants made in their first three years of teaching appear to match their learning preferences as young students. However, the participants did note several drawbacks to their in-service learning options such as a mismatch with mentors or consultants, distance, time, and cost.

These teachers' beliefs, opinions, and values do appear to have influenced their PD experiences and resultant teaching practices (Cheng-Kredle & Kingsley, 2014; Lamonte & Engels, 2010; Wilson, 2012). Moreover, their personal habits, abilities, and experiences played a key role

in their literacy teaching (Benevides & Stagg Peterson, 2010; Nathanson, Pruslow, & Levitt, 2008;). The personal and professional benefits that the participants received from their in-service professional learning underscore the assertion that teacher education continues over the first few years of practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Munby, Russell & Martin, 2001). The findings of this study support Kane's (2010) evaluation of NTIP. Kane (2010) found that new teachers across the province valued the professional learning opportunities offered by the program, but felt that the mentorship component was not fully realized. Like the participants in this study, Kane's participants wanted more time with mentors who were closely matched with their teaching assignment, and they wanted more specific feedback from their mentors.

Conclusion

There is much debate in the literature about the best methods to prepare and support teachers. This study helps us to understand the role of pre-service programs and in-service programs in the lives of six beginning teachers, and how these formal learning opportunities intersected with their early school learning and their early teaching experiences. The teachers in this study who struggled as students did not feel that their pre-service program met their learning needs, but they were very motivated to continue their in-service learning due to the variety of content and delivery available. They were particularly motivated to learn how to help students who struggled as they did as pupils. If we can make pre-service learning more flexible and adaptable, we can help pre-service teachers get more out of their initial teacher education programs. Furthermore, we need to differentiate our teaching to meet the needs of pre-service teachers just as we strive to do for school children.

The results of this study suggest that the value of attracting and retaining teachers who struggled as pupils may be that we have more teachers in the system who seek out professional learning opportunities because they have empathy for students who struggle, recognize when students are struggling and are motivated to help these students. Failure to do so may result in a self-perpetuating system whereby students who excel in traditional classrooms become teachers who have little experience with academic struggle and therefore are not motivated to engage in professional development that would enable them to help their students who struggle.

All of the participants in the study were surprised that the reality of their literacy teaching in the first three years was so different from their expectations. Those who had been strong literacy learners expected that literacy would be the easiest subject to teach and would give them the most satisfaction. Therefore, it was not a focus of their in-service learning. The participants who struggled as pupils expected the opposite, and therefore focused on literacy in their in-service learning. As a result, the former group was frustrated by literacy teaching and the later group found it to be the teaching area that brought them the most satisfaction. At both the pre-service and in-service levels, teacher educators need to alert beginning teachers that their strengths as learners may be the areas that they need to focus on the most in their PD.

As Feiman-Nemser (2001) states, "if we want schools to produce more powerful learning on the part of students, we have to offer more powerful learning opportunities to teachers" (p. 1013). Academic strengths as a student may create challenges as a teacher whereas academic struggles as a student may provide motivation and insight in teaching, particularly when teaching students who are struggling. Further research in this area will help us to understand how teachers' learning history and profile may affect how they are able to benefit from formal and informal learning opportunities.

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