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Developing Hearts and Minds:

*How field experiences informed and inspired students in a
BA Early Childhood Teacher Preparation Program*

Jolene Pearson

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ABSTRACT

This study is a qualitative analysis of the reflective journals and prayers of thirteen pre-service students enrolled in a BA early childhood teacher preparation program at a faith-based university in the mid-west. While the journal entry and prayer were required, students were told they were to write freely in their journal entry and include a freely written prayer about anything that was important to them or caught their attention. This opportunity to write freely resulted in students writing and praying about their experiences in organic, authentic, descriptive, and reflective ways. Their journal and prayer entries provided insights into the multi-faceted experiences students had and how they thought about their experiences. The qualitative analysis revealed five overarching themes: *Children, Course Connections, Teaching Strategies, Professional Identity, and Beyond the Classroom*. This research adds to the literature on how field experiences and reflective assignments contribute to the professional preparation of early childhood candidates.

Key Words: journaling, early childhood, field experience, reflection, prayer

Field Experience

Field experiences, sometimes referred to as practicums, are endorsed as a critical component of developing effective teaching practices by nationally recognized organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, The National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education, and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation. “Teacher education programs prepare prospective teachers with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they require to teach young children based on research, theory, considerations and practice” (Saracho, 2013, p. 571). Given the wide range of learning needs of teacher candidates, programs rely not only on what is taught in the courses, but on opportunities for students to experience and practice in early childhood classrooms. Field experiences have been

described as “experiences in the classroom that students in teacher education programs complete before graduation” (La Paro, 2016, p. 209).

Supervised field experiences have been identified as one of the key components in early childhood teacher preparation (Wee & Webber, 2014). Field experiences provide opportunities for students to experience practice in action and help them assess their fit for a career in teaching. Importantly, research has linked field experiences to both teacher retention and student outcomes (Saracho, 2013). The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future study (2003) found that new teachers who had extensive supervised field experience remained in the profession longer than those who had had limited field experiences. A five-year study completed in New York City, which included 31 elementary teacher education programs, found that preparation programs with a more substantial focus on field experiences had significantly more effective first year teachers (Boyd, et al., 2008). A majority of teacher candidates (65%) also identified that field experiences had the greatest impact on them during their course of study, while 20% identified coursework and 15% identified faculty (Ritblatt, et al., 2013).

Field experience has been highlighted as one of the most critical aspects of the teacher preparation program (Baum & Korth, 2013; Bornfreund, 2011; Sumrall, et al., 2017; Zeichner, 2010). It is through field experiences that students discover if they are drawn to the work of teaching young children and begin to explore a plethora of important skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to become an effective early childhood teacher. Field experiences can powerfully influence students’ impressions about the field of early childhood education as well as influence their motivation to complete their bachelor’s degree and pursue a career in early childhood education after graduation (Saracho, 2013). Field experiences typically involve observing in the classroom as well as facilitating and leading activities under the supervision of a cooperating teacher. The efficacy of field experience was found to increase when these experiences are undertaken simultaneously with formal coursework, facilitating the application of course content to their practice (Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). High quality, supervised field experiences linked to coursework have been found to assist teacher candidates in linking theory to practice. It has also been found to help them become comfortable in the role of teacher and have the ability to apply what they are learning to their practice (Hammerness, 2005).

Limited research regarding field experiences

A survey of early childhood teacher preparation programs found that 96% of associate and bachelor’s degree programs required field experience (Maxell, 2006). At the same time, this study found that no specific standards for the settings, duration of the placement, or specific focus of the experience had been developed (Maxwell, 2006; Whitebook & Ryan, 2011). A decade later, La Paro (2016, p. 215) noted that “Even with the attention and importance of field-based experiences in teacher preparation, there is an extremely limited research base from which to draw information.”

Journaling as a Pedagogical Tool in Professional Preparation

Just as field experiences are seen as a key critical component of teacher preparation, helping teacher candidates develop reflexivity is another critical skill supported and encouraged in teacher preparation. Zeichner (1992) noted that reflection in teacher education is regarded as a

critical element of the professional growth of a teacher. In clinical settings, journaling has been used to promote self-reflection, document an individual's perspectives, and help students articulate their thinking and engage in problem solving. Friston (2008) made a distinction between unstructured journaling, which allows students to self-identify what they find important, and structured journaling, in which the instructor identifies specific topics and objectives for the journals. In either style of journaling the goal is to help students integrate information and communicate their perceptions in written format. O'Connell and Dymand (2006) found that journaling can provide a way for a student to ground their personal experience during a field experience, integrate course information in a classroom setting, and promote critical thinking.

Many disciplines require students to journal as a way to promote deeper learning and understanding (Blake, 2005; O'Connell & Dymant, 2006). In teacher preparation, journaling is a way to promote reflection so that pre-service teacher candidates can construct knowledge about teaching and think critically about the skills and knowledge needed to teach. It provides an opportunity for students to express questions and personal perspectives (Lee, 2008).

Kim (2018) identified the following benefits to assigning journal writing: journal writing contributes to the course subject knowledge construction by promoting personal reflection on what they are learning and how they feel about it; helps the student become an autonomous learner; and provides a space to develop critical reflection through recording criticisms, doubts, frustrations, and joys. This study also found journaling to support the development of appropriate teaching practices.

O'Connell and Dymant (2006) conducted a study with a focus group of higher education faculty that included asking how faculty evaluated the journals when they were required assignments. This raised awareness of challenges such as the time needed to read each student's journal entries, whether to use rubrics, templates, or pass/fail grading, respecting the privacy of students' views and experiences, and how to respond to subjective entries. All of the focus group participants agreed that "to be taken seriously, the journal entries must affect the final grade" (p. 682). In addition, all focus group participants agreed that providing qualitative comments were the most powerful things the students will take away from the assignment. The focus group described the value of journaling in juxtaposition with finding an evaluation method that both impacted the final grade and also allowed students to freely express their thoughts.

In their 2005 article entitled "*The Paper Mirror: Understanding Reflective Journaling*," Hubbs and Brand wrote, "The reflective journal holds potential for serving as a mirror to reflect a student's heart and mind" (p. 61). They highlighted the importance of both experiential learning and self-discovery as powerful learning tools. They described journaling as a learning strategy which allows students to "mull over ideas" and "piece together life's unconnected threads," creating a fertile ground for significant learning (p. 62). They also include a focus on the ethics of assigning reflective journaling. They noted that when assigning self-reflective journals, the instructor must clarify the purpose of the journal (self-knowledge in learning) and how the journal will be treated. For example, students need to know: *Will it be a private dialog with the instructor? Will it be shared with anyone else?* Ostorga (2006) noted that important to the process of reflection is that students feel safe to "explore their values and develop their practice" (p. 19). Finally, given that students devote time and effort to writing the journal entries, instructors should find ways to assure students that their work is being monitored throughout the semester and devote time to providing feedback (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Keeping a journal

during field experiences and practicums can help activate the students to make meaning of their experiences. In addition, these assignments can provide the instructor insights about the setting and the student's appraisal of the classroom, cooperating teacher, and young students (Minott, 2008; Recchia & Beck, 2014).

Prayer

In 1902, William James, a philosopher and psychologist, wrote in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that prayer is the 'very soul and essence of religion'. The *Religious Landscape Study* (2017) conducted by the PEW Research Center found that 55% of those surveyed reported praying daily, 16% weekly, and 6% monthly. This study pointed to prayer being common practice across individuals from a variety of faith backgrounds: Evangelical Protestants, Catholics, Buddhist, Hindu, Mormon, Jewish, Jehovah Witness, etc. A 2021 PEW survey found, "Self-identified Christians of all varieties (including Protestants, Catholics, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Orthodox Christians) make up 63% of the adult population in the USA and common to all was the practice of prayer."

Concerning the practice of prayer, Ladd, et al. (2007, p. 210), wrote, "Among the available practices, prayer stands apart as a form of discipline accessible to individuals at all levels of spiritual development and commitment". This may be one reason that prayer is widely considered the center of religion. Prayer is also unique among spiritual exercises in that one of its principal goals is to strengthen associations rather than weaken them." Ladd and McIntosh (2008, p. 29) defined prayer in this way: "prayer is the typically intentional expression of one's self in an attempt to establish or enhance connectivity with the divine, with others in a religious or spiritual framework, and with the self." They pointed out while some prayers are carefully crafted, not all prayers include prior planning and others prayers intensely personal. Ladd and Spilka (2013) identified that prayer was not only focused on self-exploration, but also can be intercessory, focusing on the well-being of others. They also highlighted that prayer is a type of communication and way of developing a relationship with God. They concluded that prayer is both a religious and spiritual phenomena, emphasizing that prayer is multi-dimensional in motivation, expression, and cognition.

In a recent study that focused on learning why people pray, Froese and Uecker (2022) found that Americans overwhelmingly indicate that they pray because they believe it offers beneficial outcomes. Another finding was that the majority of Americans who pray agree that prayer makes them a better person, brings them closer to God, and fixes both personal and world problems. One of the strongest beliefs revealed in this study (88%) was that praying helps others. They concluded that Americans pray not only for personal needs, but also because they believe prayer is important to their family's and community's well-being.

Adopting the freely written journal and prayer assignment

As a new faculty member I chose to adopt many of the features of the syllabus my predecessor had created. One of those items was an assignment to "Keep a journal with a dated entry for every instance of attendance of field experience and write a prayer." No other directions were given in the syllabus nor was the previous professor available for consultation. I moved ahead

with including the assignment as it was written by my predecessor. As might be expected, questions like these arose from students: *How long should the entry be? Is there a minimum word count? What should I write about?* My answer was, *Write about things you experience each time you go. What catches your attention? What does it make you think about? Be sure to date each entry and include a prayer.* Students uploaded these required journals/prayers into our learning management system for grading and instructor feedback three times each semester.

First student submissions

Despite their misgivings about what they should write, the majority of the students turned in robust, descriptive journal entries. As a result of being free to write about any aspect of their field experience or personal reflections, students wrote about interactions with children, characteristics of children, challenging situations, special circumstances in children's lives, their own opportunities in the classroom, as well as learning from their cooperating teacher. Students documented some remarkable examples of empathy young children had for one another. The journals and prayers also made it clear the importance students placed on developing relationships with the children. These relationships with the children increased students' positive feelings about early childhood education. Journal entries shared their personal adjustment to being in a classroom. The written prayers amplified the students' thinking and reflection on sometimes complex situations. It was clear that field experience stimulated the student's thinking, excited them about the field of early childhood education, and made the course content come alive. The journal entries and prayers provided evidence of both learning and reflection.

Reading the journal/prayer entries helped me get to know each student at a deeper level. Providing feedback created an opportunity to establish a dialog between myself and each student. Reading and responding also sparked an idea in how to use some of the journal entries for highlighting concepts in the course. These ideas are described in the discussion.

Grading considerations

As identified by Lee (2005, p. 65), journal writing given as an assignment "treads the fine line between personal issues and professional development." Being assigned to write about anything they deemed important or caught their attention resulted in students writing about a wide array of topics that were captured in the themes reported in this article, but also revealed a good deal about each student's dispositions such as patience, flexibility, creativity, risk taking, sense of humor, etc. In assigning an open-ended reflective journal, it was important for the students to know that the goal was for self-reflection and that they would receive full credit by maintaining journal entries with prayers for each day of field experience. In giving feedback, care was taken not to respond in ways that judged what they chose to write about or how they framed their entries. Another decision was to provide detailed feedback to selected entries that affirmed their ability to highlight concepts related to early childhood teaching practices or curriculum. Responses to personal content or concerns were sometimes done in person. The value placed on their work was demonstrated by providing feedback in a timely manner and with specific responses. While time-consuming, it was a highlight for me three times each semester to read and respond to what the students had submitted. The journal and prayer assignment became an invaluable tool for me to get to know the students and what they experienced. In cases where the first entries submitted were not robust (usually the first set when students were still unsure what

to write about) students received feedback to give more detail. This simple prompt resulted in students increasing detail in their subsequent entries.

Selection of journal and prayer data for analysis

Students who had completed both Foundations in Early Childhood Education in the fall and the Early Childhood Curriculum course in the spring during the academic years 2016-2018 were contacted and invited to give permission for their journal entries to be studied. Because they had already completed both courses, there was no pressure to participate nor concern that not participating might impact their grade. These two early childhood education introductory courses, linked to the field experiences, had been taken in their sophomore year. These courses were intended to build the students' knowledge of child development, give them experience interacting with preschool aged children, introduce them to developmentally appropriate practices, and provide experience in working with diverse groups of children and families. The university had developed field placement partnerships with four nearby school districts that offered pre-kindergarten programs as well as two private nationally accredited child development centers that provided full-day early care and education. To fulfill their field experience requirement, students spent five hours per week at their placement site – typically two and a half hours on two different days.

Thirteen students agreed to allow their journals with prayers to be analyzed by signing an informed consent that had been approved by our Institutional Review Board (IRB). Special IRB permission was obtained in the consent form because prayer is considered a special type of private speech. All thirteen students were females between the ages of 18 and 20 and were of Euro-American, Asian-American, and Latina descent.

Creating a data set for analysis

Once a student signed the consent form, their archived journals stored on our electronic learning system (Moodle) were downloaded to a university password protected computer. Each of the thirteen students had an average of fifty-two entries over the course of two semesters. To create a more manageable data set for analysis, a set containing six to eight entries from each of the thirteen students was randomly downloaded. The final data set for analysis consisted of 91 journal/prayer entries.

The analysis team

The data analysis team consisted of myself (the instructor of the courses), the assistant director of a child development center who has also served as an adjunct early childhood professor, a former preschool teacher, and a teaching assistant. The teaching assistant had taken the courses and completed the journal/prayer assignments, but her journals were not part of the study. Because of our experiences in early childhood education, this allowed us to use our “horizons of experience” (Gadamer, 1994) to identify themes and topics core to early childhood education practice. In Gadamer's view, having a horizon of experience is considered an important way to conduct research as it gives the researchers the ability to see the familiar but also note things that were surprising or unexpected. Dey, Schatz, et al., (2000) note that in making inferences from the

data, the researchers should be familiar with the data, sensitive to the context of the data, and willing to change and discard categories as the data is analyzed.

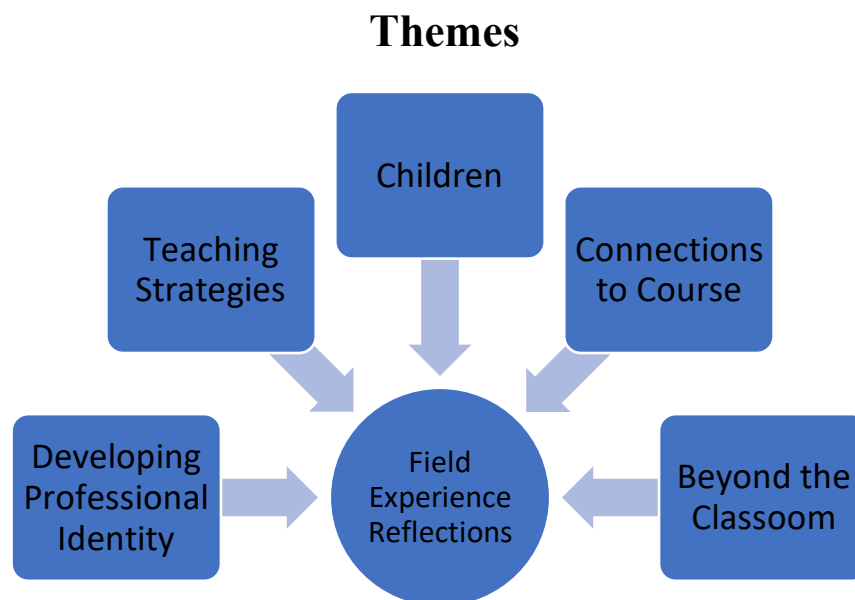
Research Process

Each of the analysis team members read through the selected data set making detailed written comments. After this step was completed, an inductive analysis process (Patton, 2014; Vagle, 2018) was used to identify the themes and patterns that emerged from the analysis. The next step was to look across the identified topics of the entries for possible themes. This involved a review of the written notes made by each team member, then in-depth discussion that led to identifying descriptive and explanatory themes.

Findings

Five themes emerged: *Children, Course Connections, Teaching Strategies, Professional Identity, and Beyond the Classroom*. The analysis team reviewed both the journal entries and accompanying prayers. While the themes were identified primarily from the journal entries, the team found that the prayers were an important portal to understanding nuances of what students experienced, desired, and learned from their field experience. The accompanying prayers expressed things such as gratitude for having the field experience opportunity, focused on needs of individual children, asked for wisdom in addressing challenging situations, or acknowledged the gift their cooperating teachers were to the children. The prayers also frequently included a desire to learn to be an effective teacher and specific needs for themselves.

In presenting the findings in this article, samples of the students' full, unedited entries are included to illustrate the multifaceted thoughts and experiences expressed by the students in their free flow, authentic voices. Only the names of children and teachers were changed to protect their identities.



Theme 1: Children

The student journals/prayers had multiple, robust entries focused on children. It was clear students were eager to have the children respond to them as well as become involved in interacting with the children. Students frequently included rich descriptions of children's creativity, temperament, and empathy for peers. What stood out to the project team was that all 13 students wrote about a child or group of children who made them feel welcomed or successful. These relationships with children gave the college students a role and purpose in their field experience classroom.

Journal/Prayer samples:

Student feels joy when a shy child warms up to her

Journal Entry: I also spent some time with a very shy girl named Annie. Annie doesn't talk hardly at all, I think because she misses her mom so much when she leaves. I tried so hard to get Annie interested in group time and a Valentine's Day project the children were working on. She let me read a book to her and help her with her project. I feel a strong connection towards Annie because I know I was the exact same way when my mom would leave me at school. I can remember missing my mom so much. Finally, I helped get the children ready for outdoor play and was able to play with them outdoors for about 15 mins. I spent the whole 15 minutes playing with Annie who has officially warmed up to me. She was smiling and laughing because we made a game out of me "giving her a boost" up to the monkey bars. My heart was so overjoyed that I was able to make her smile today.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I pray for Annie, I pray that you will fill her with Your love and help her to feel welcome at school. I ask that you help her with confidence and give her peace in missing her mom during the day. Amen.

We noted that the student identified with the child's feelings and was persistent in trying to find ways to engage with the child. When the child warmed up to the student, the student was able to give her individual attention, which in turn made the student feel successful. The prayer provides additional insight into the student's attention to the child's need to feel welcomed, gain more confidence, and feel peace when separated from her mother. The prayer also revealed the student's ability to identify the child's social and emotional needs, her compassion for the child, and her understanding of the importance of school being a welcoming place for children.

Being remembered by children and identifying growth changes in the children

Journal Entry: Today was my first day back since Christmas break started, and it felt so good to be back. The students remembered who I was, so that made me happy because you never really know with four-year old how that will go. We got a new girl, who is

super spunky and cool. One of our little girls left, and is no longer in our class which was sad news, and then a little boy of ours is spending all of February in India. So there were a lot of changes happening while I was away. Another change is the students themselves. There is so much more organization in our room, which is saying a lot because our room is filled with a diverse bunch, so I didn't know if we would all get there, but it seems like for the most part things are starting to click! Overall I just had a really fun first day back. I was happy to see all their faces and be called Ms. M again, so all was well.

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for the beautiful children who welcomed me back with such open and loving arms after I had been gone for so long. The growth that has happened to their minds, social skills, and creativity is amazing to see. I pray that you use me this semester in this classroom to pour love into these little ones. Amen.

The fact the children remembered her was important to the college student. The college student points out the developmental growth she has observed the students make since the beginning of her time with this group of young students. Finally, the student's prayer seeks to find ways to contribute to the growth of the children through her participation in the classroom. This is an important recognition of how teaching is key to contributing to the children's learning.

Understanding how an assignment impacted student learning

During the spring semester, students are assigned a 'focal child', which is a child they observe and collect data on using the *Teaching Standards Gold* framework (Heroman, et al., 2010). The culmination of the assignment is the creation of a portfolio which is given to the family. It became clear that all of the college students developed a special interest and relationship with their focal child.

Journal Entry: It is so fun having a child to watch and write about, however it is hard because I focus more of my attention on him than the other children. I'm watching the children but always trying to keep my eye out or listen to Tommy do something because he isn't as talkative if I am by him. Today I was surprised when he asked me in particular to do something for him. It was really nice outside today and the children were sledding. I had repeatedly been pushing the sleds down the hill for other children which must have intrigued Tommy. He came up to me and asked me to push him on the sled and said, "Pedal to the metal!" I was so surprised at his sudden confidence but also proud of him.

Prayer: Thank you that Tommy is coming out of his shell. I pray that Tommy would want to interact with the other children and would converse more with the other children as well as with adults. Thank you that the other children let Tommy and the other children do things the way they want to and not tease him for not talking or being more quiet than the other children.

The student's sharper focus on this child led her to observe this child to be more quiet and shy and that supporting him to be more interactive and talkative might serve him well (as noted by her in prayer). She noted that other children give Tommy time and space without pressuring or

teasing - which speaks to the classroom culture of respect. The team noted how the student delighted in the child's saying "Pedal to the metal!" The assignment had resulted in the student getting to know this child's special qualities and for her to appreciate an individual child's needs.

Big emotions, peer compassion and empathy for a classmate

Journal Entry: Today was a bit of a long one. One of our little boys on the autism spectrum lost control after one of our teachers said the word "Kindergarten". So for the next two and a half hours, he was in full on meltdown mode. I felt bad for him, since he couldn't help it, and I also felt bad for the teachers who tried to help him/were with him more than I was. I was sitting with another one of boys with special needs and we were drawing on a whiteboard, and he looked at me and said, "Let's make Thomas (the Train), he loves Thomas." It didn't help sadly, but it was a very sweet gesture. All the students you could tell were distracted by the screaming and commotion, but I was really impressed with their ability to keep going on with class. They all kind of took on the mentality of "he's having a rough day," but I'm going to do my job and we tried to continue on with our day as normally as possible.

The student observed the strength of trigger words for a particular child. She understood she couldn't control the child's emotions. She experienced the teacher and assistant working patiently with the child. She recorded how another child tried to cheer up his friend by drawing *Thomas the Train*. This child even knew his classmate's preference for *Thomas the Train*. The student noted, even with his special needs, the child is capable of being a good friend, something that could have been easily overlooked. We appreciated how the student pointed out that the rest of the class tried to go on with their day as normally as possible.

Prayer: God, thank you for helping us all get through today. For keeping our patience in check, for keeping us calm, understanding, and resilient. Thank you for the way the other students reacted to the situation, and for the compassion in their hearts for a fellow student.

The student acknowledges that this was a tough day – she doesn't ask for it not to happen again, but thanks God for the blessings that were given, like patience and how the other students reacted. She was able to see positives despite a difficult situation. The team saw this as an important way to frame a difficult day and showed the college student as having understanding and empathy for everyone in the classroom.

Game created by a child: lessons learned

Journal Entry: Today, as I came to the center, I found a group of children playing in the locomotion room. One of the boys was working on creating a game where you had to bunny hop through one hula hoop at a time. He made two lines so that two people could race each other. Each time he would take a turn, he would finish just behind another girl who was participating. He kept working and was determined.

The time came for the locomotion to be closed for Pre-K group time, and he still had not won. He broke down in tears after that because he had not won. I then talked with him about winning not being everything, and that even though we didn't finish first we are not losers. The girl who kept beating him then said, "It is okay, you can win next time". After wanting me to stay with him, he was finished being upset.

This really was a good reminder for me about how fragile children and their feelings are. The boy was so happy and excited one second and was crying the next. It was a good reminder, although it would be easy to simply tell the child to stop crying, to help them understand their feelings and what they can do about them.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you so much for the authenticity of young children and their emotions. I pray that you would continue to equip and prepare me to best help these children deal with the extreme emotions that come with their age. I pray you would help me to respond in a respectful and loving manner that acknowledges what the child is feeling, that will show them how to respond in the future. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The student describes a game created by a child and how the competitive aspect left the boy who created it continually losing. The student records the peer who won providing comfort and support to the boy who lost. Importantly, the student recognizes helping a child process their feelings is more important than simply getting a child to stop crying. The student's prayer reflects her respect for children and their strong emotions - recognizing the importance of learning how to respond in ways that support the children and help them develop social-emotional skills.

Theme 2: Course Connections

Course Connections were journal entries in which students had an 'ah ha' moment and recognized they were experiencing or observing concepts taught in the college courses.

Journal/Prayer samples:

Anti-Bias

Journal Entry: Today, the children got to experience live insects when the bug scientists came to the classroom. They got to ask questions and hold and see real insects. I thought it was really good because one of the bug scientists was a woman and one was a man. It's really important for the children to see that this is a job for either gender.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I pray that these children can stay anti-bias about gender roles. These children have such impressionable minds, so I pray that teachers can continue teaching in an anti-bias way.

In both courses students had learned about the importance of an anti-bias approach to teaching and curriculum. In this case the student identifies one aspect of anti-bias, which is not limiting portrayals of career options for both boys and girls. She recognizes that given impressionable minds, concrete examples are important.

Active play and social interaction as an important part of the curriculum

Journal Entry: Today, outside play was full of connections to class. We have been talking about gross motor play and its importance in early childhood education, and I saw so much of that on the playground. I played lots of tag and lots of hide and seek, both which have become commonplace activities that happen every day. Seeing how much fun the children have participating in this type of activity (active, out-door play) combined with what we are talking about in class really validates its importance in their education.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You so much for the opportunity I have had to be able to be a part of this important part of so many children's education. I pray these children would continue to enjoy being active, and that they will continue to have the opportunities to foster this type of growth. In Jesus' name, Amen.

An emphasis in both courses was on curriculum that provides opportunities for children to develop physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially. In short, a key concept in early childhood education is to focus on the 'whole child.' The student chose to highlight the important opportunities the children had to engage in active play and social interaction on the playground versus simply seeing outside play as recess or a break for teachers.

Process vs. Product

Journal Entry: Up until recently our projects have been very product based. The students are given instruction and shown an example and the goal is to make yours look like the example. Whereas, today for example, we were making bees and we just showed them the pieces of the bee and told them to figure out how to put the pieces together and to make the bee however they wanted it to look.

And it was so fun, again to see them think through the steps of cutting, gluing, writing their name and the order they wanted to do the steps in. We got all different types of bees. There were some with 4 wings, some with so many stripes it didn't look like stripes anymore, some were tiny, others were big, and it was just very much a process project and all the teachers and I really like watching their process, so hopefully we will continue to do more!

Prayer: Dear God, I thank you for creativity, for the process, for trial and error, and for the beauty of art. Watching these little people who have such huge minds full of creative thoughts and ideas being tapped into is so fun to witness. I just pray that you continue to place the love of art and creativity on these students' hearts, because as we grow old, we

tend to think these things aren't important, which is so sad. I pray for our room God and that we continue to grow together and inspire one another. Amen.

Often "art" in early childhood is more like a craft project, in which the goal is to have the final product resemble a model. This student's college classes taught her that process art is important because it gives children the chance to be creative and express themselves. She appreciated what took place when children were allowed to create their own bees as well as how important creativity is to the learning process. In addition, the student's prayer expands on her understanding of the importance of creativity throughout our lives.

Theme 3: Teaching Strategies

Teaching Strategies journal entries included ways of working with the children that allowed the children to persist, be helped to regulate their emotions, identification of skills children needed to learn, the selection of materials and room arrangements that contributed to creating a positive learning environment.

Journal/Prayer samples:

Creating a calming space

Journal Entry: Today at a large group, one of the children in the class began crying profusely during the large group because Teacher M didn't call on him to answer the question of the day. When he began crying, Teacher M explained to him that we have to take turns answering the questions in the group, but he still continued to cry. Teacher M decided to send him to the quiet cube, which is a small area with pillows in the library where the children can collect themselves. I haven't really seen this corner being very useful. Children mostly go there for fun. However, when Caleb was sent there, he was able to stop crying and calm down. It's interesting for me to see the strategies that work differently depending on the child.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I pray that Teacher M can continue to find the strategies that work best for her students. I pray that the teachers put in these children's paths are able to do so as well. Amen.

The student observed how the teacher calmly handled a difficult situation by knowing the child would benefit from the calming space - a space the student had not seen used in this way. The prayer reflects her understanding that teachers need to differentiate their approaches to students.

Being flexible and responsive

Journal Entry: Today in the lunch line, we had a child that was very upset to hear what was for lunch. When Junaid found out that hamburgers were being served, he got very sad and mad. Junaid really looks forward to lunch time, so this was a really big disappointment for him. I love how Teacher P handled this situation. She went up to Junaid and said, "I'm sorry you are sad. I know you really like lunch time. What can I do to make it better?" Junaid told her that he wanted the cheese taken off, the hamburger cut

into fourths, and he wanted ketchup on the side. Teacher P happily agreed and met all of his requirements. This allowed Junaid to be heard and enjoy his lunch.

Prayer: Dear Lord, I pray that Junaid can be calmed in this way by all of his future caregivers. I pray that Teacher P continues to have the knowledge and skills necessary to help calm these children's needs.

Scenes like these will be familiar to those who work with young children. The student was able to witness how the teacher directly addressed the child's needs in this situation by acknowledging the child's feelings and responding in an individualized way. This prayer is an example of how the student extends her reflection from the journal entry focusing on a specific student/teacher interaction to recognizing the importance of teachers in the future also being able to assist the child in similar situations.

Facilitation vs. Direct Instruction

Journal Entry: Today, it was too cold to go outside in the afternoon so the children stayed inside. I was able to help, for about an hour, two students write "chapter books". They came up with the idea and were both so excited. One wrote about penguins and the other candy. Seeing how hard they were working, and how they didn't want to stop until they were finished, was so much fun. Seeing their love for writing and the enjoyment they get from it is awesome. Being able to guide and facilitate these children as they work to master the letter sounds really reminded me what they are capable of. The process may have gone faster had I simply told them each letter in each word they were writing, but instead, I helped them find the answers themselves for a lot of the letters. I was reminded of the importance of understanding what each child is capable of and helping them achieve to the best of their ability.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You so much for making each and every one of Your children unique. I pray that you would help me to understand each child individually in order to best meet their needs. It never ceases to amaze me what You made these young minds capable of doing, and I pray you would help me cater to the specific needs that each one of those young minds that I work with has. In Jesus' name, Amen.

In early learning, best practice is to build upon a child's interests and follow the child's lead. In this example the student realizes how motivated the children are and how she can help them learn how to find the answers versus giving them the answers. The student describes her recognition of the children's enthusiasm as an important motivator to learn. Her prayer acknowledges the brilliance of children and their unique needs, personalities and skills. She asks for developing her ability to ability to cater to specific needs of children.

Theme 4: Developing Professional Identity

Professional Identity were those entries in which the student expressed opinions about teaching practices or personal success in interaction with children. Students included affirmations about things they tried and made them feel successful or expressed opinions about practices that made

them feel uncomfortable or did not seem to work. As expressed through their journal entries, field experiences placed students in a position to witness what worked, develop personal agency working through a situation with students, and gain insights from their cooperating teachers.

Journal/Prayer samples:

Appreciating cooperating teacher's style

Journal Entry: Today was my first day at the center. The teacher, Ms. K is super nice and seems to have close personal relationships with every child and cares deeply for them. I was very impressed with how sensitive and sweet she was with them and how gentle yet effective she was with them when resolving conflict. I think that she will be a very good example for me to follow because I am a very gentle person and sometimes struggle with discipline and classroom management, and I think she will be able to show me how to be gentle and firm at the same time. I had fun beginning to get to know the children, although I do not have all of their names down yet. This center is very different from my fall center, and I was surprised by how diverse the children were and with how many children seemed to have behavioral or emotional difficulties. I think I will enjoy working with these children because I like being challenged and trying to work to cater to children with unique needs and learning styles.

Prayer: Dear Lord, Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work with these children and teachers. Please help me as I get to know them, so that I am helpful and make a positive impact on them. Please help me to learn as much as I can from them, and keep me open to learning new things. In Jesus' name, Amen.

The student's first impressions of the cooperating teacher are positive and the student recognizes the teacher is both gentle and firm. The student recognizes dealing with classroom conflict is an area she needs to grow in and senses she will learn from this teacher. She reflects on the differences in the classroom between her fall and spring field placement. Her prayer reflects her disposition to learn and grow. This is a critical disposition for all teachers.

Disagreement with teacher's approach

Journal Entry: I got to the center and we started with free play. During this time, Mrs. J asked me to direct the play for many students, making sure that they stayed at a station until they completed some task. While I like the idea of building an attention span, I think that the play should be directed by the children and you shouldn't force a child to play in a specific way to play. She would also ask me to play with children at all times, and have a somewhat constant teacher to play with. I think that children should be able to play with children or teachers if they wish to, not constantly. Sometimes children need to be alone and have some time to themselves.

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for today and the chance to be with the students again. I thank you for the chance to work with the students and see all the gifts that you have

given them. I pray for the teachers, especially Mrs. J and Mrs. C. I pray that you give them rest and peace in a time off and that you can rejuvenate them to come back to the center. In your name I pray, Amen.

The journal entry is an opportunity for the student to both articulate her disagreement with the cooperating teacher and then articulate her developing philosophy around free play. In the prayer she expresses gratitude for the opportunity to be a part of this classroom. She seems to sense the need for the teacher to have time to rest and rejuvenate.

Developing confidence: Growth mindset

Journal Entry: Today things were beginning to get heated between a couple of students. One student didn't know how to read so she made her own words while holding the book upside down. Another student saw that and tried correcting her and they both disagreed. Eventually they began to get closer and closer to one another which was when they decided to scratch each other.

I separated the girls from getting physical with each other and reminded them to use their words to express their feelings or to come to an adult if things are getting difficult. Another encounter today was with two students having trouble sharing. I noticed there were lots of egos. "Mine" "No me first." I reminded them to take turns and share. I also gave examples of what they can say to each other and they repeated after me. This was very encouraging because it confirmed that they were willing try something to make the situation better and it also gave me comfort knowing that I can have a positive influence on them.

Prayer: God, Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity. Thank you for pouring this passion in my heart and giving me the desire to work with your children. They are such a joy and blessing to teach and learn from. I want to lift up the L classroom staff to you, Father. Thank you for providing the children along with myself, a team of knowledgeable, caring and patient teachers, mentors and people to look up to. I pray that as I continue to visit, I will learn something new each time. Help me to challenge myself to step outside my comfort zone and take initiative when it's necessary and appropriate to. I pray for the children. During this time, it can feel like the children are getting used to the routine and begin to misbehave but Lord, I pray that they will be obedient to their teachers and continue to be good listeners. I thank you again for this opportunity, Lord. Amen.

The analysis team noted that the student knew what the classroom teacher would have reminded the girls to do (use words or get a teacher to help). She provided examples of ways the girls could speak to one another which successfully calmed the situation. In her accompanying prayer, the student recognizes she is passionate about teaching young children, and appreciates qualities of knowledge, patience, and caring of the staff for not only the children but her as a teacher candidate. She articulates her growth mindset by recognizing that being out of her comfort zone is critical to her own continued growth and development as a teacher.

Witnessing a teacher having a challenging day

Journal Entry: Today I was in the C room. Today it was not as good of an experience though. The teacher seemed to be in a bad mood and reacted impatiently towards the children's behavior. She was not of a clear mind and therefore could not provide the loving direction that the children required. This is a great lesson for me because I need to always be loving and put aside my mood for the day, even if I am having a very bad day. It is certainly helpful to see situations like this because we as teachers are only human, and I have to remember that about myself as well!

Prayer: Dear God, Thank you for giving me this opportunity. Please be with me as I am observing and help me to take the things I see and learn lessons from them. Thank you for all the wonderful children at the center, and help them to feel your loving arms around them. Amen.

We noted that despite this being stressful to observe, the student was able to reflect on how the teacher's mood influenced her interaction with the children in a negative way. Being able to journal/pray about this situation provided a safe place for the student to process her thoughts and emotions. Although she is identifying the negativity, she also acknowledges that teachers are human and make mistakes. The student thought about how in the future, when she was having a bad day, it would be best practice to recognize and set aside a bad mood in order to meet the needs of the children. And despite this being a negative experience, she thanks God for the opportunity to learn through all circumstances.

Theme 5: Beyond the Classroom

Beyond the Classroom journal entries were those that confirmed students were aware of situations outside of the classroom that impacted the children. The entries reflect their understanding that children's lives outside of the classroom are important to know about, be acknowledged, and given consideration when interacting the child.

Journal/Prayer samples:

Parent deployed, children share in learning about a difficult situation for a classmate

Journal Entry: Today was a super special day in our classroom. Demar brought in a book that he and his dad used to read together before he left for war. The book was called "*Night Catch*" by Brenda Ehrmantraut (2005) The story tells of a dad who had to go off to war, he and his son loved to play catch with a baseball together while he was at home. To continue the game of catch while he was gone, he pointed the North Star out to his son, telling him they can play catch with the star. They would throw it back and forth and since the dad was around the world, they would both see it at their night times. Demar loved being able to share his favorite story with the class, and the class reacted really well to it. Then once we finished the story, all the kids drew shooting stars that we were going to send to Demar's dad. The students loved this, they all came up and showed Demar their star, they asked him questions like "What's your dad's favorite color?" and "What

color eyes does your dad have?” so they could draw him in their pictures as well. It was really special.

Prayer: God, I pray that you continue to keep Demar’s dad safe. I pray that you keep Demar and his family strong while he is away, putting the truth in their hearts that he is never too far away. Thank you for the love the students showed Demar today, I know he really needs that right now. I pray that our pictures get to him safely and they bring him joy. Amen.

The student notes the cooperating teacher's example of embracing a child’s family situation and turning it into a learning opportunity for all of the children. The children had an opportunity to do something for others by drawing and sending pictures to the father who was deployed. This activity allowed the child whose father was deployed to share his story, validating his experience and generating support for the family.

In some of the data samples we found this awareness *Beyond the Classroom* was articulated in a particular prayer.

Adding a new member to the family (prayer only)

Prayer: Today I want to pray for Sara. Her mom had a new baby boy this morning and she came in so excited to tell everyone that now she has two baby brothers! It was so sweet! I pray that she will be an amazing role model for her new brother and that they will form an inseparable bond. I pray that You will be the center of this family’s life as they continue to expand and I pray that the parents would not become overwhelmed with a new child in the house. I pray that You will comfort them and I pray that Sara will continue to be her bright and bubbly self-every day!

The student highlights the joy of the family, but can visualize the very possible upcoming challenges. Her prayer focuses on both the child, who might struggle for attention, as well as the parents who must adjust. She recognizes that being an older sibling can be an opportunity for role modeling, as well as creating a strong sibling bond.

Child custody arrangements

Journal Entry: My portfolio child Autumn was not having a good day. She was very very sad and kept saying how much she missed her mom. Her parents are divorced and she spent the night at her dad’s house. So not seeing her mom today made her sad and I just could not get her interested in anything. I read lots of books to her while she sat on my lap. I felt so bad that I couldn’t make her happy. Because of her sadness I decided to not make her do anything for my observations and just showed her lots of love.

Prayer: Dear God, I pray for Autumn today, she needs your love. I lift her up to you Lord, heal her sadness and help her to have a good day. I pray for an easy transition at the center today while having a substitute teacher. Amen.

The student identifies the source of the child’s sadness given the family situation. Based on her observation of the child’s sadness, she chooses to interact in a supportive way by changing some

plans she had for engaging the child in specific activities. The student's sensitivity and ability to respond to this child as an individual was seen in this entry.

Discovering and appreciating previously unknown aspects of a child's home life

Journal Entry: Overview: Today I had another breakthrough with Sari. At lunch I sat down by her and she instantly started talking to me about her life. During the conversation she said, "Did you know that I can speak Spanish?" I had no idea. She speaks English so well and I had never heard her speak it (Spanish) before. As I started asking her more about it, she told me that she usually speaks Spanish at home and English at school. We spent the lunch period by her teaching me Spanish words. She was so excited that she could teach me something about her life and it was a very good experience for our bond.

Prayer: I pray that teachers begin to understand how important learning about their students is. Children all have their own story, and I pray that all teachers allow those stories to be heard.

In this example, the student appreciates the child as a bi-lingual language learner and shows enthusiasm when the child shares this knowledge. The student assumes the role of learner allowing the child to teach her words in Spanish. In the early childhood courses students learned the importance of children maintaining their home language while learning English. Her prayer acknowledges the importance of knowing a child's background.

Thinking about a *parent's* possible experience of her child's distress (focus on the prayer)

Journal Entry: Maria is a very shy little girl and when she came into group time today, she cried when she had to leave her mom. I understand what it is like to be shy and scared of the unknown, because I was a shy little girl. My goal is to get her to open up to me and have her enjoy her time with the other children.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, Please help Maria's mother not to feel like she is abandoning her child, but help her feel at peace she is doing the right thing for her daughter. Thank you for placing Maria at a place where her teachers truly care about her. I pray that Maria will not be fearful anymore and that she will really open up.

The student displays an understanding that not only is the child distressed upon leaving her mother, but that the mother may also be feeling some distress. In early childhood settings, relating to and with parents is emphasized. The team noted she was able to hold the parent's experience in mind as well as the child's experience of distress.

Final Entries

As we analyzed entries that included the last day of field experience, each one expressed gratitude for their field experiences. The student often noted not only the ways the children had grown and developed, but how they grew and developed too. It was gratifying to read how much

the students had appreciated and learned from their field placements. Below is an example in which this student reflected on the relationships she developed with children and the relationships the children have developed with one another. Her prayer, like several other students' final entries, acknowledged ways in which the field experience helped her grow not only in her teaching skills, but as a person.

Example of a journal/prayer from a last day of field experience

Journal Entry: Today was my last day and it was hard to say goodbye. Witnessing these students grow over the past year is such a beautiful process to watch. I'm so proud of each and everyone of them and all they have accomplished. Today, we had the privilege of having firefighters come to our room, since two of our boys' dads are on the force. They read the students a story and then brought them out to their fire truck. The students loved this. They were so intrigued with all of the gadgets the truck carries and that they got to sit inside of it. We were outside a majority of our day since the weather was beautiful. While we were outside, I looked over and of our class, all but two, were sitting in a circle playing together. To me, it looked like their version of duck-duck-gray duck. I couldn't help but smile, with how our room started at the beginning of the year to now, they have come so far. They enjoy each other, they share ideas, take turns, respect one another, and are true friends.

Prayer: God, I thank you for the time I got to spend with these students. How they have helped me grow as a teacher and a person. I pray God that you keep them safe this summer and that they are all excited to start Kindergarten in the fall. I thank You for all the learning opportunities you have given me this year and for the relationships I have made. This is an experience I will always remember. Amen.

Special insights added to the study by a student

An unexpected opportunity arose when a former student whose journals/prayers were a part of the study gave this feedback on her experience journaling/praying in the two early childhood courses versus other courses. She offered this insight as to why being able to freely choose the focus of her journal entries and prayers was important to her.

The Journal Assignment: Thinking back to my previous Early Childhood Education classes, I never really realized the value my journal reflections had on me. I remember in previous classes having required journal entries, but with question prompts that needed to be answered. When it came to responding to the prompts, all I focused on was just answering the question as fast as I could and being done with it.

The only requirement for the journal entries in the fall and spring early childhood classes was the prayer at the end. As a student, I was able to write freely, more robustly, and had more meaningful content for these classes. The open-endedness of the early childhood journal requirement encouraged more writing, even though there was no required amount needed.

The Prayer Requirement: The other thing that was different with early childhood journal requirements was adding a prayer at the end. Looking back into my journal I see hope within all of my prayers. Writing those prayers helped me think back to the things I am grateful for. The prayers made the reflection more deep, as it got me thinking of the children I had as a son or daughter, or even thinking about the families. I didn't just see them as students, the prayers brought me to seeing them as people with their own unique lives outside of preschool. Their prayers also did a wonderful thing of showing a silver lining. When there was a more difficult day at school, I could tell that in my own writing. I could sense my previous self's frustration, worry, or sadness. However, whenever I went to read the prayer, it sounded hopeful, and like I was telling myself, "Tomorrow is a new day." For example in my journal I wrote "J, K, and I were all having a not so great week as we are dealing with some sort of stress in our lives," and ended it with a prayer consisting of asking God to bring comfort and stability, and having faith that He would do so.

Revisiting my journals two years later

When revisited my journals, I remember thinking, I never thought I would look at these again. It was strange to look back through my own lenses from a few years ago. I could see how much I have grown as an educator while I read through. Seeing all the nervousness I have overcome, the new ideas and knowledge I have on educating young students. I never realized how valuable writing these journals were. They are like a photo album of words. I saw how easily my own thoughts brought me right back to the setting. I would have never gone back and looked at these journals if it weren't for this study, and I am so glad I am now I did look back. The content and enriching experiences within is so valuable and beautiful to revisit.

My emotions

As I read through them, the memories all came swarming back to me. I remembered almost every single memory that was written in my journals. The names mentioned in I could put a sweet little face too, and remember what they were like when I was with them. At one point I realized tears were forming while thinking about the wonderful semester I had with those children. This is a great reminder for me. Every little thing counts with little ones. Every interaction, every praise, every smile, every redirection, it matters. As we get older we may not think of it in that way, and think of it as something that you just do, but it is so much more than that. It is helping shape their little minds, it is building trust, or a safe space for them.

Discussion

We did not find any instances in which students wrote about things that we deemed were irrelevant to early childhood education. Indeed, everything the students wrote and prayed about was relevant. This confirmed the complexity of knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to teach young children and to prepare pre-service teachers. For example, the analysis team was able to gain insight into the value of the field experience to the student, their adjustment in the classroom, information about the cooperating teacher's style, how the student interacted with

children and staff, and what kinds of situations they encountered. Additionally, the journal entries and prayers also revealed the students' understanding of child development, developmentally appropriate curriculum, and the importance of relationships - not only with children but with other teachers, staff, and parents. Their entries and prayers revealed aspects of their personal dispositions such as passion, patience, flexibility, creativity, high energy, sense of humor and at times concerns..

These insights underscore the value of open-ended journaling as a way to help students reflect on their field experiences and as an invaluable opportunity to get to know students as individuals and developing teacher candidates.

For institutions or program for whom assigning prayer would not be appropriate, faculty could add a prompt to a open-ended journal assignment. *What did you make of your observation of experiences today?* Or *What could have enhanced the situation?* Prompts such as these ask the student to think beyond merely reporting what happened or what they observed.

Use of journal entries in class

Besides the dialogue between the student and myself, opportunities were created for students to share their experiences (as recorded in their journals) with one another as well as using selected entries as a teaching tool in class. Here are some examples of how this was accomplished:

Pair Share: During the course meeting time, students were paired up and asked to share one or two of their journal entries with one another. This allowed each student to further describe their experience as well as learn about situations they had not encountered personally.

A Lesson from the Field: From time to time, I would add a student's journal entry to my PowerPoint presentation. This served to provide a realistic example of a particular situation I wanted to highlight or was an example of a situation or concept from the textbook. It also served to affirm the value of the student observations and effort to record them in their required journal/prayer assignments.

An opportunity for future reflection of growth: The student who reread her journals realized this was a valuable exercise. She recognized how she had grown as a teaching candidate while recalling the classroom she had been a part of. Faculty can recommend students save their journals and encourage them to re-read them further into and beyond their college preparation program.

Conclusion

This study identified specific ways an open-ended journal/prayer assignment provided opportunities for students to process, document and reflect upon their field experiences. The students' journals and prayers revealed the vast array of important opportunities and experiences that took place during their field experiences. Additionally, reading and responding to the students' journals and prayers facilitated the faculty member developing relationships with students by getting to know them better through their journals and prayers.

Loughran wrote: “Reflection is effective when it leads the teacher to make meaning from the situation in ways that enhance understanding so that he or she comes to see and understand the practice setting from a variety of viewpoints” (2002, p. 35). The open-ended journal assignments allowed students to reflect on a wide range of experiences that caught students’ attention and resulted in students thinking in holistic ways about what teaching and learning means in an early childhood setting. The journal entries and prayers documented the substance of the student’s field experiences as well as revealing the understandings and meanings students ascribed to these experiences. Analysis of open-ended journals and prayers illuminated the multi-faceted process of interactions, perspectives that shape teacher candidates during field experiences. Finally, this study demonstrated how the use of open-ended journaling assignments promoted reflective thinking and became a powerful pedagogical opportunity for both students and the faculty member.

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