

**Professional Development from Scholar-Practitioners within a Pandemic: Let Us Listen to  
the Voices of Experience**

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## **Professional Development within a Pandemic: Let Us Listen to the Voices of Experience**

What does a secondary education professor in east Texas have in common with a professor of special education and early childhood education in east Ohio? Well, these faculty members of teacher preparation programs were able to join together and participate in a unique collaboration due to COVID-19's impact on the spring 2020 semester. The collaborating professors work with both general and special education pre-service and in-service teachers in varying stages of their teacher preparation program in all content areas and grade levels. Some students were on the brink of their student teaching semesters, some were just starting their teacher preparation program journeys, some were in the midst of growing their own professional development as pre-service teachers, and some were teachers working on graduate degrees in education.

Thanks to social media, the professors were able to connect and take part in the sharing of online professional development sessions with other teacher preparation programs across the world. This sharing of professional development and hearing from a variety of voices by way of scholar-practitioners in the field led to an exciting new collaboration among special and general education faculty and staff at several universities, a natural science museum, a 4-H County Extension office, and an elementary school. Never underestimate the power of sharing and collaborating!

What or who is a Scholar-Practitioner in relation to education? Typically, in-service teachers are referred to as "practitioners" within the classroom while the term "scholar" has been reserved to describe those involved in research within higher education (e.g., professors, researchers). Yet the term "Scholar-Practitioner" brings the two concepts together through embracing a mindset of professional development that from the outset of their careers, educators

can embrace the mindset of scholar-practitioner and simultaneously be developing greater expertise as both a practitioner and a scholar (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). In other words, educators who view themselves as Scholar-Practitioners embrace a sort of practical wisdom by analyzing the daily occurrences or actions that happen throughout the classroom and within social and instructional interactions with their students to make informed decisions as they engage in their teaching practices. Scholar-Practitioners are always learning, always reflecting, and always intentional in what they do inside (and outside) the classroom.

One way of being intentional within the college classroom setting is through the use of guest speakers to grow the students' and the teachers' knowledge about a topic or subject. Bringing in guest speakers from the context of practice to illustrate content being taught through the course and/or textbook readings helps to "bring to life" the material for the students. In some cases, one could argue that the guest speakers and the stories of the material applied to real world scenarios or settings helps to bridge the research to practice gap in fostering authentic learning in the pre-service teachers. It is not atypical to hear students compare the "real world experience" from the "academic experience" indicating a disconnection between experiences of instruction and the meaning of the instruction in their own lives (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). Additionally, the students may go on to graduate and become Scholar-Practitioners by putting into their own practice what they learned from the guest speaker(s) someday!

Years ago, during a class on educational administration in Megan Reister's (lead author) Master's program, a guest speaker shared an inspirational mantra he lived by as principal of a large elementary school. He shared the quote, "Prior planning prevents poor performance!" and then went on to explain how he incorporated intentional planning, thoughtful conversations, and

open communication with colleagues and staff at his school to create an atmosphere of intentionality and accountability within and outside the classrooms.

That expression came to mind multiple times throughout the last several months as I, a professor of special education and early childhood education in Ohio, experienced the tumultuous second half of a semester that no one could have predicted or planned. No one could have previously prepared for what occurred – schools closing, moving to remote teaching, and working full-time from home while also managing children at home full-time without the usual supports just to name a few of the unexpected events that occurred alongside COVID-19. In this most unusual situation, one could hardly be faulted for poor performance no matter how much planning happened on the fly.

It is true that plans were changing from day to day, and even moment to moment at times, but what we want to share with you here is the completely unexpected windfall that came out of this pandemic and the move to online teaching. An amazing professional development opportunity for pre-service teachers evolved and was graciously shared as a direct result of quick new planning in the moment to still attempt to prevent poor performance. The purpose of this writing is to share a reflection of six collaborators, or Scholar-Practitioners, who came together to provide professional development for pre-service and in-service teachers' professional learning experiences during their transition to emergency remote teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) through a self-initiated professional learning community (SIPLC) (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). The mutual goal of this joint collaboration was to provide for the pre-service and in-service teachers enrolled in the teacher preparation courses an opportunity to learn from the voices in the field through guest speakers/scholar-practitioners who would create professional development sessions on a variety of topics pertinent to education. The pre-service teachers are prepared

through university programs to reflect on current thinking and practices within the discipline but, at times, may enter school environments where this research-based knowledge may not be incorporated into practice (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). Efforts were made to bring together currently practicing in-service teachers or others in the field to share experiences with the pre-service teachers that would help to inform their learning in conjunction with what was being taught in the teacher preparation programs.

This writing focuses on the improvement of professional development and practices in the field (LaBoskey, 2004). Adopting this widely practiced research method among teacher educators (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013), the current collaboration that was provided aimed to deepen the understanding of pre-service and in-service teachers' experiences in the professional learning community (PLC) as they transitioned to remote teaching as a result of the pandemic (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Song et al., 2020).

One thing to consider when engaging in professional development, whether it be through PLC (e.g., as a student enrolled in a class) or SIPLC (e.g., as professors who informally joined together to provide enriching experiences for their students in their classes and to grow in their own knowledge as professors), is to keep in mind the concept of collaboration. Friend and Cook (1990) characterized collaboration as the interaction between at least two co-equal parties who voluntarily engage in shared decision making in order to achieve a mutual goal. The elements of collaboration defined by Friend and Cook are (a) a mutual goal, (b) parity among participants, (c) shared participation, (d) equitable responsibility for decisions, (e) shared resources, and (f) voluntariness. Those who participate in the collaborative relationship are considered to have mutual goals if they share a goal that has been established through mutual agreement and provides professional benefit to all parties involved.

In this pandemic-induced situation, those of us who collaborated in creating and sharing the virtual guest speaker sessions shared the goal of providing pre-service and in-service teachers with “enriching educational endeavors or encounters and learning opportunities or experiences” (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). Educators are considered to have parity if the sense of equality regarding their input among the individuals within the collaborative relationship is present (Compton et al., 2015). This was evident through the process the collaborators engaged in when designing the content of the professional development and choosing when to present to the pre-service and in-service teachers.

How did this professional development, and therefore collaboration, through a professional learning community of Scholar-Practitioners come to be? Well, here is how it all started. Heather Olson Beal, a professor of secondary education in Texas, posted in a closed group on social media the below message on March 16, 2020.

Question / request . . .

I am a teacher education professor. Our students are supposed to complete X number of "field hours" for course requirements and for certification requirements.

I work in a special program that focuses on community engagement, community-based teaching, engaging with families, etc.

Wondering whether anyone has any expertise in that area--whether professionally or personally, as a parent--and might be willing to join one of my classes via Zoom to talk to or with my students. We've had local parents join our classes to talk about working with teachers, how classroom management and assessment strategies impact their kids / their families, etc. Parents with ESL backgrounds?

Really, I could cast a pretty wide net. Ha ha.

Could anyone else benefit from setting up something like this? Is there an opportunity here for us to work together to connect in these ways?

A handful of women excitedly responded to Heather's request as we were eager to pitch in and help as needed by collaborating and pooling resources as we recognized that, despite moving to virtual teaching, including guest speakers in our coursework would still be beneficial.

Guest speakers with expertise within their discipline add credibility to coursework and provide students with real-world examples to supplement their coursework and enhance their learning (McClearly & Weaver, 2009). What better way to learn about the real work done by educators than by hearing directly from the Scholar-Practitioners themselves (Easton, 2008)?

In addition, several of the participants, despite being academics, spoke from their experiences as parents, demonstrating that parents are important sources of expertise about the school system, underlining the principles of the special programs that pre-service educators are completing at their respective universities and colleges (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). As Scholar-Practitioners gain more experiences, they add more and more nuanced stories to their repertoire, thereby meshing together knowledge with technique to convey ideas to students whose readiness to learn can vary dramatically, pandemic or no pandemic; like master artisans who deftly use the “tools of the trade” to achieve specific effects, Scholar-Practitioners are able to draw from an array of instructional approaches to support learning (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). These stories that were shared were the basis of the professional development sessions that were created. While COVID-19 was and continues to be stressful and troubling for so many reasons, the expansion of online teaching it brought about presented a professional development opportunity for us that likely would not have occurred otherwise.

What unfolded over the next month was an amazing collaboration that led to professional development for pre-service and in-service teachers not only in Texas and Ohio but elsewhere. This exciting new collaboration among special and general education faculty and staff spanned several universities, a natural science museum, a 4-H County Extension office, and an elementary school. The women who led the professional development sessions came from the following institutions: Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU), University of Ottawa,

University of South Carolina School of Medicine, Franciscan University of Steubenville, and the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville, the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and San Francisco Unified School District. In addition, two in-service teachers who are also graduate students at SFASU and an SFASU alumna who is now a middle school orchestra director delivered sessions.

Next, voices from this collaboration of Scholar-Practitioners will be shared. With the arrival of COVID-19, came a form of improvisational teaching in the sense that the professors had to put together professional development quickly to help compensate for what would have been in-class guest speaker sessions. We felt it was critical to include input from those who are currently working in the field because the information shared would lead to relevant and meaningful learning while also leading to empathy in the wise, ethical, humane practice of education and likewise, an effective classroom “performance” emerges from classroom discourse and is not scripted by the lesson plan or the teacher’s predetermined agenda (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019).

Tracy Ensor, a graduate student and Nebraska Extension employee who presented about partnering with community organizations within the classroom, said the following about the experience:

When Heather put out the ask in the social media group we belong to, I immediately saw that my expertise coincided with the course focus and wanted to help. As an experienced educator who is routinely invited into classrooms to provide relevant learning activities for K-12 grade students, it was a pleasure to present for pre-service and in-service teachers and then have a rich, in-depth discussion on this topic. In addition, this whole experience of collaborating with colleagues from across the country has shown me how worthwhile long-distance virtual collaboration can be. I gained much from the discussions and working with this group of women.

Emily Regan Wills, a professor at the University of Ottawa, Canada who presented based on her experience as chair of a school council (similar to a PTA) at a progressive public elementary school, said the following:

As someone who has done ethnographies of different kinds of classrooms, I know how many different types of educational environments there are, and how much depends on what teachers feel is possible and what the structures of their schools system does to support them. I was very grateful to join with another parent friend to share my experiences as a parent and leader in the Churchill Alternative School community, particularly during a turbulent year that saw a multi-month teacher strike as well as a pandemic and shift to online learning. Although there's a lot about the regulatory environment and core social practices that influences what makes Churchill possible (says the political scientist...), it was great to give some ideas to pre-service and in-service teachers about what might be possible for their own teaching careers in terms of building relationships with parents and their organizations.

Mary Ellen Cashen, an Assistant Principal at an elementary school in San Francisco, presented on preparing for and attending an Individualized Education Program (IEP) Meeting, and the roles of members of the IEP team. As an elementary school administrator, Mary felt that many new general education teachers did not fully understand the IEP process or their role in it as a general education teacher. She shared, "It was great to chat with pre-service teachers about this and discuss how the transition to emergency distance learning meant that we were collaborating and holding IEP meetings in a whole new way."

Shelby Gull Laird is the Head of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville, and presented as a parent with her daughter, Patricia, who has dyslexia. They discussed the challenges students with dyslexia were facing as schools transitioned to the online environment. She noted,

As a parent working from home but also serving as an at-home learning guide, the COVID-19 closure of our local school brought us unique challenges. Suddenly, we had to figure out unique ways to get read-aloud assistance from relatives, and to work on a system where we worked together to request accommodations Patricia needs in order to be successful. In presenting to the students who are future teachers, Patricia and I wanted

them to understand that reading-based materials sent home might take double the time for students with learning differences to complete, and we were excited that the students had so many relevant questions. Patricia was nervous, but wanted to participate so that teachers would have a greater understanding of the challenges a kid with dyslexia faces in the classroom and during at-home learning.

After each professional development session, Heather shared Zoom recording links with the other contributing guest speakers so that they could share them with their students. These resources were so appreciated given that we had found ourselves in the midst of emergency online teaching without adequate time to engage in prior planning to prevent poor performance. Student evaluation comments revealed how much they had enjoyed learning from the online webinars and that they had grown in knowledge now that they had heard about a particular topic from an expert. Some students in a rural area in Texas--a right-to-work state--were shocked to hear about a teacher strike from a professor and teacher in Canada and to hear about the ways in which school climates differed from Texas to Ohio to California to Canada.

As professors, we recognize that nothing can truly replace an in-person guest speaker and meeting face-to face-but the professional development we were able to create by sharing our time and talents with one another through the virtual guest speakers/scholar-practitioners was still of high quality and appreciated by our students. The student feedback, from incorporating guest speakers in the classroom in the past, supported the fact that meaningful relevant teachable moments make an impact and remain with our students long after they have left the classroom. Preliminary feedback from this past semester's students indicate support for continuing the practice of bringing in virtual guest speakers for the same reasons. This finding supports the Scholar-Practitioner form of learning that learning is grounded in meaning-making and is experiential (e.g., hearing from the voices from the field), relational (e.g., listening and watching the presentations "live" and asking questions as they arose, situated (e.g., topics covered touched

upon current events all were facing at the moment), recursive (e.g., some speakers spoke about similar topics or events from different viewpoints), deliberative (e.g., the pacing of the schedule of the professional development sessions was set so that pre-service teachers could have some time to process the content before hearing from a new guest speaker built into the course calendar), and discursive (e.g., reflections of what was learned were required of the pre-service teachers after the professional development sessions) (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). Further, these same authors highlight that when both pre-service educator and professor have been open to authentic learning and have developed a trusting, discursive relationship, they can deliberate together on the value of what has been gained from the journey. We, and the students definitely recognize the importance of providing, and continuing to provide, these professional development guest speaker sessions. A major criterion of value is the extent to which the learner was able to accomplish what he or she set out to do so, in this way, learning becomes self-perpetuating throughout the span of one's professional life which speaks to the importance of engaging in constant self reflection and analysis as well as engaging in professional development as a Scholar-Practitioner (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019).

The student quotes below illustrate how impactful the professional development sessions and hearing from voices in the field from Scholar-Practitioners were in aligning with coming to see *themselves* as Scholar-Practitioners at the pre-service levels. One student who participated in the professional development session led by an SFASU alumna regarding trauma-informed parenting wrote in a concluding reflection:

I learned that Occupation Therapy helps with stress (fight/flight/freeze). Not many people know how to handle kids with trauma. I would recommend this because it is important for educators to be informed on this and work alongside parents instead of thinking they know more than the parent.

Another student, after participating in the professional development focusing on collaboration between special education teachers and parents of students receiving special education services, wrote,

I learned that communicating to both parents/guardians is important to keep them both equally engaged in your classroom and the child's learning processes. A takeaway I had in regard to a teacher being in the child's microsystem was to be sure that my relationship with the child's parents was appropriate and healthy. It is okay to disagree, but it is important for the student to see that both the teacher and parents have the same goal—for the child to succeed. I also learned that there is more to being culturally responsive than simply knowing and being aware that there are different cultures, but actively representing their beliefs in the classroom.

This revelation from the student in her reflection as budding Scholar-Practitioner points to the importance of practical wisdom in being present in the moment, discerning what is significant, and responding in an educative manner (Alda, 2017; Llewellyn, 2017; Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). The view of a different student from the same session as listed above is shared here,

As a pre-service educator, it is very important to remain calm. It is important to be there for other pre-service educators and help them if they are struggling. It would be good to not panic during a time like this. You have to remember students are facing challenges just as you are and it is important to understand that. I think that during a time like this it would be important to not overload students with work either. They are probably stressed out enough that they will not be able to get the proper teaching they need so it will be hard for them to figure things out on their own.

Another student in the first course in the certification course at her university attended the session with Dr. Laird and her daughter about challenges completing schoolwork during COVID-19. The student wrote:

Dr. Laird and her daughter talked about the definition of dyslexia and common accommodations at school that are given to students. Patricia read a 5th grade passage about pseudo scorpions to demonstrate that people with dyslexia take longer time to read a passage than people without it, which is why they need extra time for assessments. They discussed how some schools have reading support for students with dyslexia during school hours, but some schools do not, which makes them have to get it somewhere else and it can be costly.

This way many people are unable to get extra reading help for their children because it can be costly or not available in the area. They discussed that services are still being provided, even though they are doing everything in an online format. They showed us examples of her homework and explained how difficult it is for her to do if she does not have someone to read it off to her since her homework was about the meanings of proverbs and adages and her homework uses ethnic names that she has trouble with because names are difficult for her to read.

Another student who attended the session regarding dyslexia and accommodations during COVID-19 said,

The presenters are expert because one is a professor with a title of Dr. and she is also the mother of a girl with dyslexia. As a parent, she helps her daughter a lot with her schoolwork, which makes her an expert on the topic.

After listening to the session that reviewed Individualized Education Plans (IEP), a pre-service teacher who will be student teaching next semester shared,

After watching the session, it reinforced what I learned previously about all the teachers and individuals who need to be present at the IEP meeting. I also learned before that the student can be present if they are old enough. I learned that the IEP document and meeting is very official and is actually a legal document. I also learned that goals are especially important in the IEP plan for students to strive to meet. I found it helpful to learn that general education teachers should know the needs, goals, and information about their student provided in the IEP before the first day of school even if it will require more effort or work on the part of the general education teacher which is what I'm going to be.

As some of the takeaway points that were shared by the above student comments reveal, open listening and genuine relating create the potential for change, not only in the other, but in oneself as well which is a value held in high regard by Scholar-Practitioners (Alda, 2017; Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). As Alda shares,

I came to the conclusion that, even in life, unless I'm responding with my whole self-unless, in fact, I'm willing to be changed by you-I'm probably not really listening. But if I do listen-openly, naively, and innocently-there's a chance, possibly the only chance that true dialogue and real communication will take place between us.

It does take effort to communicate with others, to collaborate, through the use of technology, and a variety of support strategies are needed for success to occur, but it is so worth it when the needs

of the students are being met and, on the professors' end, efforts yield high-quality professional development for pre-service and in-service educators (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2014).

The professors of teacher preparation programs in different areas of the United States, managed to still provide valuable, worthwhile and innovative professional development for pre-service educators and graduate students who are in-service teachers despite the myriad ways in which COVID-19 impacted and derailed the spring semester. Pandemic or no pandemic, we believe in and recognize the importance of providing community-based guest speaking-embedded experiences from Scholar-Practitioners who can share practical wisdom, online or in person, and conveyed to our students why it was important to keep these aspects of our courses going amidst everything that was happening and all the changes the world was facing.

Through exposing our students to current, relevant material in this way, we were able to see how they are learning in concrete ways as we observed them explaining something in their own words, asking questions of the guest speakers, making connections, recreating (rather than reproducing) information they have synthesized and learned from the guest speakers, justifying their decisions, explaining their thinking through talking with one another, doing something with the information, reflecting on the content that is shared with them, re-drafting, revising, and re-thinking about the information, as well as offering analogies and metaphors of their own on the content while processing the information presented to them (Webb, 2017). All of these traits or habits reflect on the pre-service teachers as taking the beginning steps toward transforming into Scholar-Practitioners.

We were also modeling several behaviors that we hope our students do when they become teachers themselves, including professional collaboration, networking, and leveraging available resources. We hope that perhaps the seed was planted that they too can engage in the

practice of being a Scholar-Practitioner themselves in recognizing the multifaceted identity attributes within themselves: self as – scholar, learner, practitioner , and student rather than *just* as a student (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019). We hope that in future semesters, we can continue to develop this professional collaboration that grew out of wanting to help one another through a simple request made via social media. Who knows? We may even want to continue this online collaboration in the future when we return to face to face classes.

Utilizing this collaborative sharing of virtual guest speakers and resources will be especially valuable considering we work with both general and special education pre-service teachers in varying stages of their teacher preparation program in all content areas and grade levels. We are hopeful that our pre-service and in-service educators will view themselves as Scholar-Practitioners upon entering the workforce and will actively reflect and engage in examining their impact within their classroom and how their actions can affect others and vice versa. Some of our students are on the brink of their student teaching semester, some are just starting their teacher preparation program journey, some are in the midst of growing their own professional development as pre-service teachers, and some are in-service teachers working on graduate degrees in education.

See below for Heather’s final post on this collaboration after the semester had concluded on April 28, 2020.

Just here to give a huge shout-out to the Academic Mamas\* who agreed--what feels like FOREVER ago but was 5 weeks, maybe 6 weeks ago?--to offer an online professional development for my students to take the place of some other kinds of things they would be doing were we not in quarantine.

Shelby Gull Laird did a fab talk with her daughter, Miss P., about doing school-at-home with dyslexia.

Dr. Emily Regan Wills and her colleague Tami Grosset did a great talk about parent/community engagement that left at least one of my students saying she needs to move to Canada (preach, honey, preach).

Dr. Megan Schumaker Murphy did an awesome talk about positioning teacher-family relationships to decrease challenging behaviors.

Dr. Mary Ellen Cashen taught us about preparing for and attending an IEP. So important.

Dr. Meg Reister taught us about collaboration between itinerant and classroom teachers--and during what was an extremely difficult time for her family. I feel more than a wee bit bad about that!

Tracy Ensor taught us about partnering with community organizations in your classrooms and got my wheels spinning like crazy.

And today, Dr. Emily Lowell gave a great talk about autism.

My students and I have learned so much and really benefited from the collective wisdom these women were so willing to share.

I'm really grateful to all of you, and to this space, because without it, none of this would have happened!

Indeed! Prior (or maybe current) planning *does* prevent poor performance, pandemic or no pandemic, and I am so grateful for this community of Scholar-Practitioners who was willing to step up to serve as mentors, to engage in swift collaboration during an already stressful time, and to overall fill in the gap by practicing what they preached alongside the pre-service teachers by sharing their practical wisdom (Piantanida, McMahon, & Llewellyn, 2019) through the stories they told and the information they shared. May our future teachers take note and rise to the challenge when they, too, are faced with the unexpected to meet the needs of their future students!

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