

Practicing what we teach: inquiry-based learning for teacher educators

School-University
Partnerships

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Abstract

Purpose – To investigate the factors that supported inquiry and professional learning for teacher educators in a summer virtual reading retreat.

Design/methodology/approach – Positioned within the frame of intimate scholarship, this qualitative interview study was similar to a phenomenological approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Koro-Ljungberg *et al.*, 2009) and designed to foreground the perceptions of the virtual summer reading retreat participants.

Findings – This study found that the following factors supported inquiry and professional learning for teacher educators: voluntary participation, an absence of a required end product, grouping participants with similar interests and values who came from different contexts and responsibilities shared among members of the group.

Originality/value – This study provides insight into the benefits of an innovative form of professional learning and the factors that contributed to its success.

Keywords Teacher education, Inquiry, Professional learning, School-university partnerships

Paper type Research paper

It is both common wisdom and established science that high-quality teachers are critical to student success (Darling-Hammond, 2000). In addition, an extraordinary number of Americans are employed as teachers (Green, 2014). These factors combined to make the teaching profession a topic of interest, speculation, and controversy even before the COVID-19 pandemic turned our society inside-out. Now that we have emerged from this time of isolation, the spotlight on schooling has returned, and in fact, intensified (New York Times, September 4, 2022). Despite the focus on teachers and teaching for the past several decades there has, until quite recently, been less attention given to those who teach teachers—the teacher educators.

As part of a growing body of research addressing this gap in the literature, the current study was designed to investigate the factors that support professional learning experiences for teacher educators grounded in inquiry.

To better understand the processes of learning for teacher educators, we investigated a virtual summer reading retreat (VSRR). Specifically, the study addressed the following two research questions: (1) In what ways, if any, was the VSRR experience different from other professional development experiences and (2) Which factors functioned as affordances of inquiry and learning for teacher educators during the VSRR? The recognition of the power of individual interest to drive learning is not a recent development. In fact, the significance of inquiry and the idea that meaningful learning is most likely to emerge as the result of curiosity

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and personal experience was a hallmark of the theories espoused by John Dewey and can be traced even further back to the teachings of Socrates and other Greek philosophers (Friesen & Scott, 2013). More recently, the classic work of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) has established inquiry as the optimal “stance” for educators as they seek to improve both their practice and the wider society. Inquiry can thus be viewed as a process by which educators seek to untangle the complexities of their work and ultimately transform the teaching profession (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2020).

This study explored inquiry-based professional learning for teacher educators working in the context of school-university partnerships. There is a very long history of schools and universities working together to both prepare teachers and improve the educational experiences of students; the number of these partnerships has grown dramatically in the past fifty years (Walsh & Backe, 2013). As school-university partnerships (SUPs) have increased in number, there has been a concomitant increase in the variety of types of partnerships which now include Professional Development Schools (PDSs), University-Assisted Community Schools (UACSs) and Education Research Practice Partnerships (ERPPs), among others. PDSs are a well-known exemplar of SUPs and trace their lineage back to the ideas of the Holmes group in the 1980s (Rutter, 2011).

School-university partnerships and professional development schools (PDS), in particular are intentionally structured to facilitate the use of inquiry for teachers, teacher candidates and students as well. In this way SUPs and PDSs, function as educational contexts emphasizing inquiry and learning at all levels. It is worth noting that the third essential of a PDS (National Association for Professional Development Schools, 2021) is articulated as “a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry” (p. 4). Because of this foundational principle, SUPs provided an ideal context for examining teacher educators’ learning grounded in an inquiry stance. To explore professional learning for teacher educators working in the context of school-university partnerships, we focused our investigation on a virtual summer reading retreat (VSRR) held in the summers of 2020 and 2021 and sponsored by the National Association of Professional Development Schools (NAPDS).

Literature review

The most compelling reason for a focus on teacher education is the consensus about the potential impact of this work. Recent research has begun to explore connections between teacher educators’ preparation and their work with future teachers, particularly emphasizing the role of preparation in developing justice-oriented teacher educators (Jacobs, 2023; Conklin, 2020). The quality of teachers is viewed as an outcome of the quality of education they receive during their teacher preparation along with their participation in on-going professional learning (Smith & Flores, 2019a, b; Tack *et al.*, 2018; Vanassche *et al.*, 2015). Quite simply, “teacher quality depends on quality teacher education” (Smith & Flores, 2019a, b).

Defining and assigning the role of teacher educator

The question of how best to define a teacher educator does not lead easily to simple answers (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016) and there are, in fact, a variety of definitions and a variety of locations for the work of preparing future teachers (Dresden *et al.*, 2019). In addition, the same role and set of responsibilities, for example, teaching pre-service teachers in a university setting, may be assigned to graduate students, to classroom teachers or to faculty members on different tracks (tenure-track versus non-tenure track). All these possible variations compound what is generally understood as the complexity inherent in the work of educating future teachers.

The complex role of teacher educator

No matter the specific definition, title or set of responsibilities, the work of teacher educators is critically important complex and challenging (Smith & Flores, 2019a, b; Snow *et al.*, 2019). The myth of teaching as a simple and self-evident enterprise has been critiqued, if not dispelled, and it is time now to do the same for the illusions surrounding the field of teacher education (Hebert *et al.*, 2019). Though the work of teaching and of educating teachers is “grounded in a relational ontology” (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016, p. 203) and takes place at a local level, this work is contextualized within the complex web of practices and policies that operate at institutional, regional, national, and global levels (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Rust, 2019; Vanassche *et al.*, 2015). The resulting multitude of requirements often competes for the attention of teacher educators.

The complexity of a career as a teacher educator is apparent in the sometimes conflicting demands experienced by teacher educators. School-based teacher educators, often referred to as mentor teachers, are directly responsible for the education for P-12 students through a wide range of tasks, including teaching, coaching, and supervising (AACTE, 2018). When acting as a mentor teacher, their responsibility to support the development of future teachers (AACTE, 2018) adds another layer of complexity to an already demanding job. Similarly, teacher educators within higher education, often referred to as university-based teacher educators (AACTE, 2018), face competing demands as they must not only engage in the preparation of future teachers and maintain their positions as faculty members, but are also frequently expected to conduct programs of research as well. For university-based teacher educators, their long list of responsibilities may include coordinating complex programs of clinical practice, teaching campus-based courses, and serving on committees at various levels within the university in addition to engaging in scholarship and research (Hebert *et al.*, 2019; Murray & Male, 2005).

The many challenges inherent in the complex role of teacher educator are exemplified by the tension between doing what is necessary to successfully prepare the next generation of teachers and the demand to simultaneously engage in rigorous research (Hebert *et al.*, 2019; Murray & Male, 2005; Smith & Flores, 2019a, b). Many teacher educators fear that the pressure to do research will negatively impact their ability to meet the needs of the teacher candidates with whom they work (Smith & Flores, 2019a, b). Similarly, there is concern that the competing demands of teaching and research may impact the quality of research done by teacher educators (Smith & Flores, 2019a, b). One major impediment to engaging in quality research for teacher educators is the reality that they often have difficulty finding the time to do research because of the time they must commit to teaching courses and supervising students in the field (Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; MacPhail & O’Sullivan, 2019; Tack & Vanderlinde, 2019). In addition, despite the fact that there is a need for future teacher educators to learn about doing research centered on teacher education while they are doctoral students, this does not happen as frequently as it should nor is the process for doing so well understood (Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Smith, 2017; Wilson, 2006). Whether as cause or consequence of the tension between teaching and research, teacher educators often see their research as completely separate from the work they do preparing future teachers (Goodwin *et al.*, 2014). And even teacher educators who report being both confident and interested in research, do not often actually engage in research activities (Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Tack & Vanderlinde, 2019).

Finally, the role of teacher educator requires that individuals attend to their own needs for professional learning and the development of an identity that guides and supports them through their careers. To reiterate an earlier point, though there is extensive research on how best to prepare teachers, there is less research on how to prepare teacher educators (Smith & Flores, 2019a, b; Snow *et al.*, 2019). In fact, many people who work as teacher educators were not specifically prepared for this career and often rely on their own previous experience as teachers to inform their practice as teacher educators (Conklin, 2015; Rust, 2019; Wilson, 2006). Though by the 1960’s most professions had adopted some type of formal programming

for continuing education (Daley & Cervero, 2016), there has been less systematic support for the on-going learning of teacher educators (Snow *et al.*, 2019).

Theoretical framework

The work on adult education and professional learning, along with the perspective provided by intimate scholarship (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016) served as the theoretical framework for the study. The subsequent two sections will briefly explore these bodies of literature.

Characteristics of high-quality professional learning

Research in adult education or andragogy has found that programs are most likely to be effective when they are premised on mutual trust and respect (Kessels, 2015), recognize learning as a social process (Illeris, 2015), make use of collaborative activities (Kessels, 2015), allow participants to make choices and take responsibility for their own learning (Illeris, 2015), and emphasize critical reflection (Illeris, 2015; Kessels, 2015). Consistent with these basic tenets, scholarship on professional learning for educators has posited the value of five principles: collaboration, a constructivist approach, an appreciation for local context, an emphasis on reflection, and the opportunity to be self-determining.

First, professional learning is, at the core, a social process (Lieberman & Mace, 2008), and programs that facilitate the exchange and co-construction of knowledge and understanding are most likely to be effective (Borko *et al.*, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Cranton, 2016). Placing the social nature of learning at the center of programs of education facilitates interaction and collaboration, and thus supports meaningful learning for individuals and for groups.

Second, a constructivist approach that is inquiry-based and utilizes active learning strategies is also critical to the success of professional learning (Borko *et al.*, 2010; Daley & Cervero, 2016). Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2017) noted that the design of professional learning should incorporate collaborative opportunities for sense-making and that inquiry should be central to all learning experiences. A stance of inquiry presumes active rather than passive approaches to learning and is fundamental to the work of teachers and teacher educators as “a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across professional careers and educational settings” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 120). Thus, professional learning for teachers is believed to be most meaningful and successful when, “consistent with prevailing theories about the nature of learning and cognition,” (Borko *et al.*, 2010, p. 555) it incorporates opportunities for experimentation and inquiry (Borko *et al.*, 2010; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). A commitment to inquiry as the foundation of educational experiences has also served as a pillar of the PDS movement (NAPDS, 20021).

An appreciation for the impact of local context on the needs and interests of educators is a third principle of effective professional learning for educators (Borko *et al.*, 2010). As explained by Lieberman and Mace, “Professional learning opportunities should adapt to particular contexts thus giving these experiences more traction and momentum” (Lieberman & Mace, 2008, p. 232). A fourth principle guiding professional learning for educators should be an emphasis on reflection as a mechanism for increasing understanding and improving practice (Borko *et al.*, 2010; Cranton, 2016). Finally, when professionals have the opportunity to make choices and control their own learning, programs have been found to be more useful and more productive (Cranton, 2016).

Research on professional learning activities aimed at teacher educators and teacher education researchers has reaffirmed the salience of several of these features. Specifically, the creation of collaborative learning spaces (Butler, 2019; Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Tack, 2018) and the recognition of participants as autonomous actors capable of directing their own learning (Tack, 2018; Tack & Vanderlinde, 2019) were found to foster positive and productive learning environments for teacher educators. As described by Butler, informal learning spaces can meet

the needs of teacher educators by reflecting “the participants’ interests, questions [and] problems of practice” (Butler, 2019, p. 238). School-University Partnerships

Intimate scholarship

As explicated by Hamilton and colleagues, “Intimate scholarship takes up the study of experience, our practical knowing within it” (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016, p. 222) and includes a variety of specific methodologies including, but not limited to, self-study (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016). We used intimate scholarship as part of the framework within which to conduct our study because it enabled us to privilege the lived experiences of a group of teacher educators by closely examining their thoughts, feelings, experiences and interactions. In intimate scholarship, “Findings emerge through dialogue with others, self, with the research literature. . . Since the orientation is toward developing clear pictures of what is (ontology) rather than making claims based in modernist epistemology and abstractionist ontology, then engaging in dialogue supports the intimate scholar in uncovering and making explicit that which is implicit in their knowing and doing of teacher education” (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016, p. 223). And finally, we concur that “well-orchestrated, designed, conducted and reported intimate scholarship potentially provides more profoundly helpful knowing for doing teacher education and becoming teacher educators” (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016, p. 194). Following this line of thinking, there is much to be learned from a close examination of the experiences of a group of people who came together to explore what it means to be a teacher educator today. Our study stands as an example of the use of intimate scholarship to expand our understanding and suggest a path forward for the field.

Methods

Virtual summer reading retreat background and context

In spring 2020, the co-authors connected through a shared interest in elevating the stature of PDS research. In these conversations, the authors discussed the challenges endemic to the roles of both school-based and university-based teacher-educators committed to partnerships and partnering. They noted that teacher educators, like P-12 teachers and, in fact, all professionals, benefit from opportunities to participate in professional learning in informal spaces (Daley & Cervero, 2016). These conversations occurred during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought with it an unforeseen opportunity: a period of time without some of the usual obligations of a faculty appointment. The perceived need for a structured, yet informal and flexible learning space, combined with the lifestyle change imposed by the pandemic, sparked an idea to develop a professional learning opportunity centered on delving deeply into teacher education literature. Responding to these conversations and the contextual factors brought on by the pandemic, the Virtual Summer Reading Retreat (VSRR) was initiated.

The initial VSRR occurred in the summer of 2020 and repeated in the summer of 2021. Essentially, the VSRR was an opportunity for professional exploration and growth through the development of virtual reading groups. VSRR participants were recruited through emails sent to members of the National Association for School University Partnerships (NASUP) [1] and the School University Partnerships Research Special Interest Group (SUPR SIG) [2] of the American Education Research Association (AERA). Between 35 and 40 teacher educators participated each summer and were placed into groups of four to five people. The VSRR participants held various positions within school-university partnerships, including university-based faculty, graduate students, school-based teacher educators, boundary-spanning roles, and administrative roles. Representation spanned elementary, middle, and high school contexts, and though most participants came from the United States, several participants came from other countries each summer. Groups were created by the organizers who purposefully placed together participants who held different positions and were from different institutions. See Table 1 for additional participant demographic details.

Table 1. VSRR demographic data

| | 2020 VSRR data Number of participants | 2021 VSRR data Number of participants |
|--|--|--|
| <i>Participant roles</i> | | |
| IHE faculty and administrators | 16 | 27 |
| Field or network directors | 5 | 4 |
| IHE doctoral students | 6 | 4 |
| PK-12 teachers and administrators | 8 | 4 |
| <i>Participant locations via time zone</i> | | |
| Eastern time zone | 28 | 34 |
| Central/mountain time zone | 3 | 2 |
| Pacific time zone | 2 | 0 |
| International | 2 | 1 |
| Hawaii-Aleutian standard time | 0 | 2 |
| <i>Years in current role</i> | | |
| 0–3 years | 10 | 19 |
| 4–5 years | 11 | 4 |
| 6–9 years | 8 | 7 |
| 10–15 years | 2 | 3 |
| 15+ years | 4 | 6 |
| Source(s): Author’s own work | | |

The program was designed with a straightforward but intentionally minimal structure. Consistent with the characteristics found to be most effective for the professional learning of teachers and teacher educators, and following the commitment to inquiry notable in the PDS movement, the VSRR emphasized informal collaborative learning spaces that would encourage autonomy and both individual and shared inquiry. An initial group organizer was identified and steps for getting started were provided to support launching each group. Groups were encouraged to meet regularly (approximately once every two weeks) and leadership was to rotate among the members for each session. Leaders for each session were charged with choosing three articles or chapters for the group and generating several initial discussion questions. See [Appendix 1](#) for information about group organization and leadership.

In addition to initiating the VSRR, the co-authors served as its organizers and were active participants in the summer reading groups during both the 2020 and 2021 implementations. Following both summers, the authors heard from friends and colleagues that they had enjoyed participating in the VSRR and believed they had grown professionally from the experience. Inspired by these conversations and reflecting on their personal growth, the authors sought to learn more about the aspects of the VSRR that had influenced participant learning. Thus, it was decided to engage in a more systematic study of the VSRR.

Methodological frame

We, the authors, initiated the VSRR and participated as members of reading groups each summer. We subsequently designed and conducted the research described in this article; given this context, it is imperative that we explore our own positions in the field of education and our place in the world of teacher education. Our research, framed by the concept of intimate scholarship ([Hamilton et al., 2016](#)), grew out of our general experiences as teachers and learners and more specifically was propelled by our commitment to the role of teacher educator in all its complexity and urgency. As Hamilton and colleagues have stressed, “Researchers who conduct intimate scholarship recognize that the reader of the research is a partner in knowing and doing teacher education research. The reports of their research must make visible the relevant aspect of their own personal practical knowing, their becoming as a

teacher educator, the contexts of their setting” (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016, p. 220). All understanding derives from the local, from the viewpoint of an individual, and we therefore begin with an examination of the perspectives that we, as participants and as authors, brought to the VSRR and to our research into this experience.

Author One has alternated between roles in academia and in environments of practice throughout her more than 40 years in education. She was a classroom teacher in preschool and childcare settings and also taught for 10 years in Title 1 elementary schools. Her experience in the academy included positions as a faculty member and teacher educator at four universities; at one of these she served for 11 years as the director of a partnership between the college of education and the local school district. This work drew upon and vastly expanded her understanding of shared enterprise and collaborative inquiry.

Author Two (A2) is in her eighth year in academia. At the time of the study, she was at a southeastern institution as a clinical assistant professor. More recently, she moved into a tenure track role focused on teacher education at another southeastern university. Before entering academia, A2 spent 18 years in public schools as a classroom teacher, literacy specialist, professional development facilitator, and assistant principal. Over time the intersections of these roles solidified her commitment to partnerships and professional learning grounded in shared inquiry.

Drawing from a shared vision of good pedagogy as learner-centered and grounded in inquiry, we sought to design a professional learning structure that would support professional learning for teacher educators. As a result, the structure of the VSRR included small discussion groups, readings chosen by session leaders, rotating leadership, and the intentional absence of other guidelines.

Research design

Positioned within the frame of intimate scholarship, this qualitative interview study was similar to a phenomenological approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Koro-Ljungberg *et al.*, 2009) and designed to foreground the perceptions of the participants in the VSRR. Focusing on the perceptions of participants was necessary in order to understand how the VSRR supported the process of learning for teacher educators. As described in the introduction, the research questions addressed in this study were: (1) In what ways, if any, was the VSRR experience different from other professional development experiences and (2) Which factors functioned as affordances of inquiry and learning for teacher educators during the VSRR?

Study participants

Using a homogenous sampling strategy (Koro-Ljungberg *et al.*, 2009) and convenience sampling (Roulston, 2022), all individuals who engaged in both the 2020 and 2021 iterations of the VSRR were invited to participate in the interview study. Because the focus was on the affordances of the VSRR, individuals who had chosen to participate for a second summer were targeted for the study. Of the eleven people invited to participate, seven agreed. All interview participants identified as female. Five participants identified as White, one identified as Black, and one identified as Latina. Six participants were situated in the United States and one was international. Although all participants worked as teacher-educators, four of the participants did so as university faculty members, two participants were doctoral student, and one participant was employed as an instructional coach in a local school district.

Data sources

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data because the purpose of the study was not to evaluate but rather to gain a better understanding of the experiences (Worthen, 2002) of those who engaged with their peers during the VSRR. All seven participants were individually interviewed by one of the co-authors. Interviews lasted approximately

30–40 minutes and automatic transcription services were provided by the university Zoom license. The transcripts were then reviewed and modified for accuracy by the author who conducted the interviews. A copy of the interview protocol can be found in [Appendix 2](#).

Data analysis

All participants were given pseudonyms as part of the analytic process. Analysis occurred through a multistep process that included individual and collaborative data analysis. First, each co-author individually analyzed the complete data set. During this step, first cycle “in vivo” codes ([Saldana, 2016](#)) were formulated through an emergent process. Then, second cycle coding occurred to identify salient categories or groups of codes. To complete this process, we enacted [Saldana’s \(2016\)](#) “tabletop” method. This method consisted of manually recording first cycle codes to identify patterns and preliminary themes. Following independent coding, the co-authors met to resolve any discrepancies in their analyses. Themes, sub-themes, and ultimately assertions or conclusions, were developed through a round of collaborative focused coding which involved the review and reorganization of comments from respondents ([Saldana, 2016](#)). Assertions were based on a broad look across responses from all the participants. See [Table 2](#) for the resulting themes, sub-themes, and categories. Additionally, visuals were created to further clarify findings ([Miles et al., 2014](#)). This process consisted of each author creating an individual visual to represent their interpretation of findings, a discussion to look across visuals, and the collaborative creation of a final visual. Finally, in a member-checking process ([Roulston, 2022](#)) participants were provided with draft copies of the results of the study to make sure that they felt their experiences and attitudes were appropriately represented.

Findings

An examination of the interview data from our seven participants revealed several notable findings about how our participants understood their experiences and about the connections and inter-relationships they recognized among the ideas they shared (see [Figure 1](#)). The remainder of this section tells the story of our participants’ experiences as members of a VSRR discussion group. Our findings begin with participants’ perceptions of the context and structure of the VSRR followed by specific aspects of the learning environment with a focus on the elements of the VSRR that may have contributed to participant learning and development. Finally, this section concludes with insights into the results and impact of the VSRR.

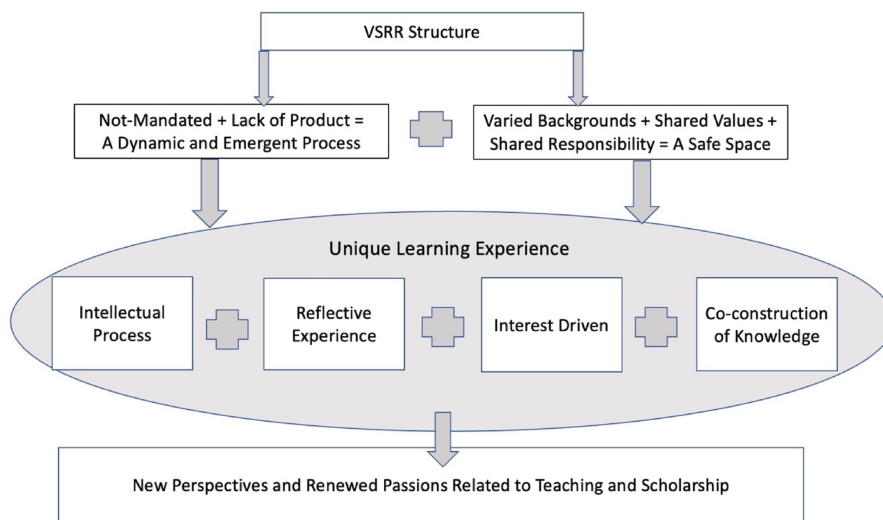
The VSRR structure

In their interviews, the participants frequently mentioned five influential structural factors of the VSRR. These structures consisted of group composition, shared values, lack of hierarchy,

Table 2. Excerpt from data analysis codebook

| Theme | Sub-theme | Category |
|---|------------------------------|---|
| The VSRR experience was different from PD experiences | Different from other PD | Different from other PD Unique Intellectual Focus |
| | Co-construction of knowledge | Co-construction of knowledge Learning from others Interest, passion, energy Social interaction and relationships |

Source(s): Author’s own work



Source(s): Authors' own work

Figure 1. Participant perceptions of VSRR

optional participation, and the absence of prescribed goals. These structural factors are explored more fully below.

Group composition. Six of the seven interviewees felt it advantageous to be placed in groups with people from other institutions, states, and countries. Brandy (a university faculty member) enjoyed the fact that the VSRR had an international group of participants and elaborated, saying, “it was really interesting [to talk with] people who had different attitudes...and different insights.” In addition to differences in geographic location and institutional role, participants were also at different stages in their careers. Jackie (an instructional coach) described her group as including two members with doctorates in education, one working on her doctorate, “and I was the baby...fresh out of [my master’s program]...so learning from them...” was beneficial.

Shared values. Despite the differences in role, location, and career stage interviewees pointed out that the participants in the VSRR had a shared set of values. Kelly (a university faculty member) explained that the members of her group all considered their work to be grounded in a similar set of values and principles. And Michelle (a doctoral student) explored this idea in more detail, stating, “The people [in] that space already came with...some shared beliefs...and some shared practices...” It was noted by participants that these shared values may exist because all the participants had the connection of belonging to the same professional organization (NAPDS) – a space for coherence. Thus, there was an inferred belief that VSRR group members shared similar philosophies and values related to teacher education.

Lack of a hierarchy. Interviewees stressed that within the VSRR small reading groups, the structure “wasn’t hierarchical.” (Brandy). Echoing this perception, Kelly said, “we took turns,” and Melissa (a doctoral student) explained that “group members rotate and have turns facilitating and putting forth the things that they’re interested in...discussing.”

Participation was optional. Four of the seven interviewees stressed the fact that their participation in the VSRR was “completely optional and on a voluntary basis” and did not “have a formal process or procedure.” (Jamie, a university faculty member). Brandy stated simply, “it was my choice.”

The absence of prescribed goals. The fifth structural feature noted by interviewees was that the VSRR was completely open-ended, there was no goal to be achieved and no product to deliver. These sentiments were shared by four of the seven interviewees. Lynn (faculty member, serving as department head) stated that she was not “pressured by production” and Melissa shared that, “one of the things I particularly liked. . .is. . .there was not a product or an end goal. . .it could be learning for learning’s sake.”

The learning environment

In their interviews, respondents often went beyond describing the structural elements of the VSRR to talk about the ways in which that structure contributed to the learning environment that was created. Specifically, participants described elements of the VSRR that created a dynamic and emergent process and cultivated a safe space for learning. Furthermore, participants explained how the combination of these elements created a unique learning environment.

Not-mandated + lack of product = a dynamic and emergent process. Because the program was not mandated and because there was no goal or expectation of a product at the end, participants noted they were able to engage in a dynamic and emergent process. Melissa was explicit about the process that evolved: “we could build . . .from session to session. . .it was dynamic and it adapted.” And as Lynn explained, because the process was more “open-ended” the participants could “talk about ideas.” This aspect of the structure of the VSRR contrasted with other learning environments as Jackie elucidated, “when we only read to produce something we’re limiting our ability to explore.”

Varied backgrounds + shared values + shared responsibility = a safe space. Comments from the interviewees indicated that the combination of three other aspects of the structure of the VSRR, the varied backgrounds of participants, a set of shared values and shared responsibility for conducting the discussion sessions, resulted in the creation of a safe space. The safe space created by elements of the VSRR structure was mentioned by six of seven participants and was one of the most compelling themes that arose from the data. Jackie commented that the VSRR was a “safe space” where she could be “authentic and real.” Kelly said, “I felt very heard and affirmed,” and Jamie claimed that the VSRR, “provided a space to wonder, to question, to be OK with not knowing.” Michelle specifically highlighted the freedom that followed from being from diverse settings, “since we didn’t have that shared context it allowed us to just think. . .more generally and more broadly.”

A unique learning experience. The structural elements of the VSRR created a safe space and fostered a dynamic, emergent process. The combination of these two elements enabled what respondents termed a unique learning experience. “It was unique. . .I couldn’t even compare it to anything else that I do” (Kelly). Several interviewees contrasted the VSRR with more traditional professional development for teachers and teacher educators. As Brandy put it, “sometimes what is mandated as professional development. . .people talk at you and you’re supposed to have learned something.” Both Kelly and Jackie similarly made reference to the VSRR as different and distinct from the usual “sit and get” professional learning offerings.

According to the participants, the VSRR served as a positive opportunity for professional learning as a result of four characteristics of this unique learning experience. The first of these characteristics was the “intellectual focus” noted by Lynn. Interviewees explained that they were supported in “making connection” (Michelle) and “helped to better process information.” (Jackie). Several participants pointed to the “reading centered. . .space” (Michelle) as contributing to this intellectual focus. Jamie, Michelle, and Brandy all explicitly mentioned being exposed to new readings and as Jamie explained, “the readings were wonderful in the sense that they may not have been the readings I would have selected. . .just because I didn’t know they existed.”

A second characteristic of the VSRR that supported professional learning was the opportunity to reflect and consider the reciprocal relationship of theory and practice.

Participants talked about reflecting on the readings, on their practice, and on the connections between the two. It was an opportunity “to do some self-reflection and self-analysis and analyze our work as teacher educators” (Lynn). Michelle highlighted the connections between theory and practice when she said the VSRR “allowed me to build those connections to practice and bring my practice into reading theory.” Jackie also articulated what she referred to as the “teacher craft” of reflection which enables her to make important connections. “Pausing, reflecting, and then looking at . . . ways to actually implement the things that you say you’ve learned, is really important.”

The social nature of the VSRR and the opportunity to develop relationships with colleagues was a third characteristic of the experience described frequently by the interviewees. Brandy stated that she was motivated by the prospect of social interaction and that the VSRR, “took away the loneliness of academic reading.” The “opportunity to connect with others in a very meaningful way” was important to Lynn and Jamie elaborated, “this camaraderie . . . is powerful. . . [to have a] sense of you’re not alone. . . we’re not alone in the work. . . gives you that sense of security. . .”

The social interaction that was a hallmark of the VSRR propelled a fourth characteristic of this unique learning experience. Five of seven interviewees reported being especially appreciative of the opportunity to learn from each other and engage in the co-construction of knowledge. Brandy explained, “the whole dialogic basis of this, I found really helpful because people were learning from each other.” The “co-construction of knowledge” was explicitly mentioned by Melissa, and Jamie said she regarded her colleagues as “co-contributors to the work that we do in these individual spaces.”

Results and impact of the VSRR

The VSRR was perceived by participants to have a personally beneficial impact in a variety of ways. They gave credit to the summer experience for direct influences on their scholarship, their teaching, and their programmatic activities. In addition, they shared that they came away with new perspectives and new insights. And finally, participants expressed a revitalization of passion, interest, and energy for their work as teacher educators.

Direct influences on scholarship, teaching and/or program responsibilities were noted by all seven interviewees. Several declared that their scholarship was supported because the things they had read were useful as evidence and citations for future writing projects, and Brandy added that the readings “sparked some ideas in me.” As for their teaching, participants mentioned using specific readings and activities with their own students and reaffirmed their commitment to active learning in the professional development they deliver. As Brandy explained, “their PD can’t be sort of sitting in classes, . . . it needs to be this dialogic process.”

Programmatic endeavors were also directly impacted. Melissa and Kelly reported that they gained new ideas about processes and procedures from their colleagues at other universities. Lynn even noted that the program she directed went through a revision following the VSRR and that “some of the inspiration. . . and ideas that we were talking about in the summer reading retreat definitely had an influence on that program revision.”

A second way in which the VSRR impacted the participants, and mentioned by six of the seven participants, was that it afforded them a new way of thinking about their roles and work as teacher educators. Brandy commented that she found her experience in the VSRR “hugely beneficial” as she was, “constantly thinking in a new way.” Melissa also expressed that she found herself “looking at things in little different angle than maybe I looked at it before.” This sentiment was reiterated by Jamie: “A lot of our conversations and readings really just challenged me in a way that either caused me to re-think a stance or explore more deeply.”

A revitalization of passion and energy for the work of teacher education constitutes the third way in which the VSRR impacted participants. The value of an inquiry-based approach and the importance of participants being able to focus, individually and collectively, on topics that interested them was noted by several and Melissa found this to be “momentum building. . .”

[and] energizing” and Brandy described everyone as “enthusiastic.” Jamie expounded on this idea remembering that her group had “authentic conversations. . . [that came] from passion and interest.” Lynn summed up this viewpoint by sharing that she was, “recharged and re-inspired” and felt she now had “some energy and passion” to continue with the work.

Discussion

Research studies on professional learning for teacher educators (Tack, 2018; Tack & Vanderlinde, 2019), for education professionals (Cranton, 2016), and for adult learners (Illeris, 2015) have generally found that learning programs are most successful when participants are recognized and treated as autonomous individuals who are capable of, and benefit from, making choices and setting their own course for learning. Consistent with these findings, the participants in the VSRR frequently mentioned that they appreciated the lack of an imposed set of expectations and valued the opportunity to engage in an emergent, inquiry-based process that was dynamic and responsive to their needs and interests.

The extant literature also suggests that powerful programs of professional learning are premised on the idea of learning as a social process (Illeris, 2015; Lieberman & Mace, 2008), and provide opportunities for the co-construction of knowledge (Borko *et al.*, 2010; Cochran *et al.*, 2009; Cranton, 2016). The need for professional learning to be centered in collaborative learning spaces is especially true for programs designed for teacher educators (Butler, 2019; Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Tack, 2018). In keeping with previous research, the responses from our interviewees focused on several aspects of the VSRR as a collaborative learning space. Participants highlighted the fact that they shared responsibility for facilitating meetings thus creating a non-hierarchical environment, and that they were motivated to engage in the VSRR because of the opportunity to interact with others, develop relationships, and forge supportive friendships. This social network in turn created a space in which participants could learn from one another and engage in the co-construction of knowledge.

The structure of the VSRR intentionally grouped together individuals who held different roles in the educational community, were at different stages in their careers, and who hailed from different geographic locations. This approach to creating groups was made possible by the modern technology of video-conferencing platforms and was necessitated by the pandemic-induced social isolation. However, there were also many benefits to this structure. Lieberman and Mace (2008) pointed out that on-line communities “allow geographically dispersed members to meet, exchange ideas and learn from each other” (p. 233) and these sentiments were echoed by our interviewees. They enjoyed the opportunity to meet with people from other parts of the world and, significantly, they also felt fewer restrictions about sharing problems and concerns when talking with people from other institutions. In addition, the literature has suggested that less experienced teacher educators benefit from participating in professional learning groups with more experienced teacher educators, especially when the focus is on research and inquiry (Tack & Vanderlinde, 2019) and provides an opportunity for “novices [to] listen to and learn with . . . more experienced peers” (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016, p. 213).

Our participants reiterated similar themes as they emphasized the ways in which collaborating with educators from other spaces, both geographic and metaphorical, fostered a safe space for meaningful conversations. Conversing with fellow group members who were at more advanced stages in their careers was also mentioned as a distinct benefit by two participants in the VSRR. Despite the productive nature of these situational differences, the participants also pointed out the support they experienced by engaging in conversations with individuals who had similar values and priorities. Previous research and the comments of our participants have clearly articulated the powerful nature of collaborative groups comprised of individual educators with different histories and contexts who nonetheless ascribe to a common ethos. “Teacher educators have a genuine passion to learn with and from colleagues and peers, and to become part of a learning community of like-minded individuals albeit with different professional trajectories” (Czerniawski *et al.*, 2017, p. 138).

The importance of reflection as a fundamental activity for the professional learning of education professionals (Borko *et al.*, 2010; Cranton, 2016) was strongly supported by comments from VSRR participants. Many of them commented on the ways their reading and understanding had been supported and challenged during their group conversations. They described how they were encouraged to reflect on the readings, and on their own practice and ultimately on the interaction between the two. They further explicated the way the VSRR had created a space to consider the “teacher craft” of integrating theory and practice.

Finally, the responses from our participants may add some insight to the debate about the competing demands of teacher education and research in the field. The literature is rife with articles documenting the perceived tension between the exigencies of preparing the next generation of teachers and the academic expectation to engage in research (Goodwin *et al.*, 2014; Hebert *et al.*, 2019; MacPhail & O’Sullivan, 2019; Murray & Male, 2005; Smith & Flores, 2019a, b; Tack & Vanderlinde, 2019). It is interesting that this topic never came up in any of the interviews. But participants *did* talk about how much they felt they benefited from the lack of requirements and lack of an emphasis on an end-product. They felt that this open-ended, inquiry-based approach gave them the freedom to explore new ideas and develop new perspectives. Perhaps this is exactly what is needed for teacher educators to begin to see research not as something in conflict with teaching, but as an opportunity to engage in inquiry just as we encourage our students, and their students, to do. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle have proclaimed, “the assumption behind inquiry as stance is that the dialectical relationships of research (or theory) and practice, . . . knowing and doing, analyzing and acting. . . make for generative and productive tensions rather than dichotomies.” (2009, p. 123). From this perspective, research emanates not from a demand for publication, but from a quest to understand, a predilection to problematize, or even just a question. A stance of inquiry thus positions all practitioners, teachers, and teacher educators, as potential researchers.

Implications and conclusions

Educating future teachers is a critically important endeavor and one that is both complex and fraught with challenges. One of the challenges, addressed in this paper, is the fact that “finding ways to be sustained as a teacher educator is not a simple process” (p. 215, Hamilton *et al.*, 2016). While it is not a simple process, our inquiry may provide preliminary direction in the quest to support teacher educators. The responses from our interviewees were unequivocal in their appraisal of the VSRR as dramatically and substantively different from previous experiences with professional learning. In addition, their responses have provided some clear answers to the research question regarding the factors that functioned as affordances to inquiry and learning for teacher educators during the VSRR. From the comments shared by our participants we were able to glean several important insights about how teacher educators feel about the work that they do and how they make sense of their roles and responsibilities. Several of these insights were based on comments that directly addressed our original research question while a final point was deduced from what our respondents did not say.

Interviewees were unanimous in their appraisal of two main aspects of the VSRR. First, they noted that engaging in a professional learning setting that was not mandated, had no expected outcomes and encouraged them to concentrate on their own “burning questions” proved to be a powerful experience. The lack of expectations along with a lack of external direction functioned as a notable affordance of inquiry and learning for teacher educators during the VSRR.

Secondly, the teacher educators interviewed for this study reaffirmed the value of engaging in a social and collaborative learning process. This finding confirms what is frequently noted in the extant literature, though how to foster such interactive spaces may be less well understood. “Whereas the benefits of cooperation are widely acknowledged, less is known about how a supportive collaborative environment can be established” (Smith, 2017, p. 639). Again, our findings may offer some hints at how such supportive and collaborative learning environments

might be created. Our interviewees noted that they benefited from being in groups with people from other institutions, from various geographic locations, and who were at different stages in their careers. They found this group structure to be helpful because they felt they had much to learn from the others in their group and, importantly, because being with individuals from other spaces minimized the potential for competition and external expectations. From these comments we have concluded that creating spaces in which teacher educators from various locations and positions can meet to talk and think together served as another affordance of professional learning for teacher educators.

Participants also provided insights into factors which support professional learning when they contrasted their previous experiences of professional learning with their time as members of the VSRR. For example, participants described the voluntary and interactive nature of the VSRR as positive and dramatically different from much of the professional learning they had previously encountered. The need to set aside a dedicated time and space for professional learning, while making it voluntary and self-directed, may appear to be a contradiction. But this is not necessarily the case. Perhaps teacher educators might be given the gift of time, free from demands and expectations, on a regular, if limited, schedule much like the productive employees of the 3M Company and Google (Pink, 2009).

A final, and related, implication that emerged from our set of interviews was that the tension between the pressures of preparing future teachers and the demand for productive scholarship may not be as unavoidable or as problematic as it may sometimes appear to be. None of our respondents mentioned this tension and while this certainly does not mean that they were not troubled by the competing demands of teaching and research, it may imply that in the time and space created by the VSRR they were able to accommodate an appreciation for all aspects of their complex role.

Teacher educators, both the groups we interviewed, and the larger population discussed in the literature, tend to view inquiry as an intrinsic part of their identity (Jacobs *et al.*, 2015) and typically engage in a variety of exploratory projects designed to improve practice and support the inquiry-based efforts of their colleagues and teacher candidates (Conklin, 2015; Reagan *et al.*, 2017). Perhaps supporting these types of activities and changing the perception of research and teaching from one of an immutable dichotomy to one of synergy and generativity would enable teacher educators to affirm and actualize a stance of inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Further, a focus on the tension between the competing demands of teaching and research may be less productive than recognizing the validity and import of a wide variety of research approaches and methods (Dresden, 2024). An appreciation for research as multi-dimensional and multi-faceted might facilitate engagement with the research process, especially when questions of interest are generated through a dynamic and emergent process as was found in the VSRR.

In conclusion we must acknowledge that we have presented the findings from a study that is small in size and small in scope. Nonetheless, we believe, along with other scholars, that all learning is, by definition, local, and yet it is still possible for us to benefit greatly from sharing our stories (Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2014; Hamilton *et al.*, 2016; Tobin, 2005). Our goal has not been to present a model of professional learning that might be copied or “scaled up” (Tobin, 2005), but rather to offer an example of what is possible and to “contribute insights about the particular that are also useful beyond the local context and beyond a single moment in time” (Cochran-Smith *et al.*, 2014, p. 19). In a similar vein Hamilton and colleagues have also suggested that examining local contexts carefully is the most fruitful avenue for developing a thorough picture of a phenomenon. They state that intimate scholarship enables us to “explore and examine the nuances of understanding that can best be extracted from particular experiences.” (Hamilton *et al.*, 2016, p. 221).

Following in the tradition of intimate scholarship and based on our conversations with individuals who participated in the VSRR, we suggest next steps, to be enacted at the local level, in the quest to support the work of teacher educators. It would appear to be more important to remove at least some expectations, demands, and regulations rather than add

things to the already too-long lists of tasks for teacher educators. And we suggest exploring ways to facilitate communication among groups of teacher educators who might not otherwise have a chance to meet. These two simple, but perhaps challenging, initiatives support the creation of spaces where autonomy, inquiry, collaboration, and reflection can take center stage.

Notes

1. At the time of the Virtual Summer Reading Retreat and data collection related to this study, the National Association of School University Partnerships was named the National Association of Professional Development Schools.
2. At the time of the Virtual Summer Reading Retreat and data collection related to this study, the School University Partnerships Research SIG was named the Professional Development Schools Research SIG.

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Appendix 1

Group organizer steps and information

- (1) Each group will meet six (6) times: once to get organized, four times to discuss readings, and one time to prepare for the closing celebration.
- (2) Your role as group organizer will be to contact the other members of your group to set up a time for an organizational meeting.
- (3) At that organizational meeting:
 - Create your schedule
 - Identify a facilitator for each meeting date and explain the role (see below).

- Remind all members of the closing celebration [insert date and time]
 - Explain to your group members that all guidelines are suggestions and should be modified as needed.
- (4) Facilitator role
- The facilitator role will rotate among members for each VSRR session.
 - Facilitators will choose readings and guide the discussion.
 - The facilitator will suggest three articles or chapters for their session and send these to their group members before their session. Two should be pieces they are interested in reading but have yet to read: one that is directly related to PDS work and one that is not. The third should be a piece that the facilitator knows well; it can be something they have written (published or in press but not a work in progress) or a piece that has significance to them.
 - In preparation for each session, the facilitator will create a set of discussion-starter questions or identify a protocol to guide the discussion.

Appendix 2

Semi-structured interview protocol for VSRR research study

- (1) How did you hear about the VSRR and why did you choose to participate?
- (2) Can you describe the experience you had the first summer you participated?
- (3) Why did you choose to participate again the second year?
- (4) Can you describe the experience you had the second summer?
- (5) Were your experiences in the VSRR similar to or different from your other work experiences? Can you explain?
- (6) Were your experiences in the VSRR similar to or different from other professional learning activities you have engaged in? Can you explain?
- (7) Did your experience in the VSRR contribute to any changes in your teaching practice or scholarly endeavors? Can you describe?

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