

“I FEEL MUCH MORE LIKE A TEACHER!”: THE EFFECTS OF CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE ON ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER CANDIDATES

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Introduction

Over a decade ago, I began taking my pre-service teaching students to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) convention. I make this annual journey with my students because I know how important these conferences became to me early in my career as a graduate student and college professor. Each time I attended NCTE, I was amazed by how invigorated and less isolated I felt. However, when I began my career as a teacher, I was unaware of these professional development opportunities.

When I began taking my students to conferences, I believed that they might benefit as I had. I believed that they would enjoy meeting authors, exploring the book show, and acquiring teaching ideas and materials. In addition, I wanted my students, who mostly come from Indiana (USA), to travel beyond this region. (Many of them told me that they had not travelled further than Chicago or Cincinnati!) I hoped that attending these conferences would expand their worlds and, hopefully, make them better teachers.

So, I began taking groups of students across the country. Driving in convoys of white university vans, we have driven from Indiana to conventions in Boston, Minneapolis and Washington DC, among others. We have weathered blinding snow squalls on the New York Thruway, encountered fog in the Appalachians, and dealt with a host of vehicle mishaps, including a broken windshield and a flat tire at 2:00 AM. It takes commitment to go to these conferences—hours of planning, thousands of dollars, and a willingness to drive for up to 1,200 miles (each way).

With the pressures of budget cuts and increased requirements for both the students in our program and for me as a faculty member, however, I began to wonder, are my students gaining enough? Is it worth the time, money, transportation and housing headaches? I also wondered what the students expected from the convention and what they were actually coming away with. I considered ending the trips after we completed one particularly difficult trip out east, but the memory of one student’s experience

changed my mind. This student, who for the sake of this article we call Richard was a senior in our program. He pulled me aside on our drive back to Muncie and told me he had something very important to tell me. He said that, just before this trip, he had changed his major to English Studies and was no longer planning to teach. Even though he had had classroom experiences, he couldn’t see himself in the profession and felt lost. After attending the conference, however, he changed his mind. He could now visualize not only his ELA classroom, but also, and perhaps more importantly, what he wanted to accomplish. He had direction and a purpose. He said he knew he was not a teacher yet, but he knew that he could be. He changed his major back to English Education.

Thinking back to my conversation with Richard, I knew I would not stop taking my students to the convention. I did still have the above questions in my mind, and I still wondered if the trips were worth it for *most* of the students. I decided it was time to research what undergraduates expect and gain (if anything) from attending the NCTE conventions.

Background

Professional development is generally seen as an important part of the teaching profession. Legislation, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), emphasizes its necessity. ESSA, the reauthorization for No Child Left Behind, calls for “collaborative and data driven” professional development opportunities that are “developed with educator input” (U.S. Congress 2015). Teacher led school improvement, which includes professional development, is also backed by NCTE’s “Recommendations for Policymakers” (2016), which argues that “the Department of Education should require, and members of Congress should advocate, that teachers be primary participants in the development of state and local plans for assessment, teacher evaluation and school improvement.”

While much of the scholarship about professional development simply *advocates* for it rather than researching it, there is some empirical

evidence, like that produced through research conducted by the National Writing Project and its affiliates (Campos 2010; NWP 2010; Kaminski 2007; McKinney 2006) that demonstrates its effectiveness in improving teacher quality. In addition, there are some studies suggesting that pre-service teachers do in fact value and perceive a need for professional development and expect to engage in it when they become practicing teachers (Richardson & Knight 2011; Goh 2013; Wæge & Haugaløkken 2013). In one such study, Susan Richardson and Bruce Allen Knight (2011) found that teaching candidates typically believe that as future teachers they would need to “[maintain] high standards of professionalism” and “[engage] in professional discussion and conversation.” A third of the students in this study stated that “group discussions at [their weekly] seminars contributed positively to their professional development” because it helped them form their own teaching philosophy and views. The researchers go so far as to suggest that teaching candidates should start this type of “professional reflection” before they enter the field. However, while this study affirms that teaching candidates recognize the value of professional development, it only studies the effects of professional development that occurs within formal education courses. It does not discuss other types of continuing professional development outside the classroom, such as conferences. In addition, the authors fail to indicate if the students are aware of how and where to engage in such professional development practices after they enter the field.

As teacher educators, we strive to train pre-service teaching candidates to value professional development, and as the above research suggests, we have been successful in our efforts. But preservice and first-year teachers may not know how or where to develop communities of practice where they can engage in professional development. As teacher educators should we be introducing them to professional development opportunities like conferences while we still have them in our classes? Should we be helping them find and become more comfortable with these opportunities? And is there actually any benefit for the pre-service teachers to attend these events while they are still students?

Since little to no research has been done on the benefits of pre-service teachers attending conferences to further their professional development skills, this study explores:

1. What effects does attending a national professional conference have on pre-

service, ELA teaching candidates’ beliefs and attitudes about professional development and conference attendance?

2. What effects does attending a national professional conference have on pre-service, ELA teaching candidates’ perception about themselves as teachers?
3. Is it beneficial to introduce pre-service teaching candidates to professional conferences while they are still in our English/Language Arts teaching programs?

Research Methods

Participants

The participants included 43 secondary English /Language Arts teaching candidates from [anonymized name] University, who voluntarily attended a NCTE Convention during 2013-16. The candidates were mostly juniors and seniors, including 12 who were student teaching at the time of the study.

As both the researcher and an instructor for some of the candidates, I recognize that they might have felt pressured to participate. To alleviate this potential issue, I stressed to them that their decision to participate in the study would have no effect on their grades in my courses. I also recognize that a limitation of the study may be that the participants were self-selected. This was necessary, however, because I could not require all candidates in our program to attend.

Data Collection and Analysis

To assess teaching candidates’ initial attitudes and beliefs about the value of conferences and about themselves as future teachers, I developed and implemented both a pre- and post-survey. I also included questions regarding what they expected to gain from attending the conference and what they actually gained, the extent to which they felt like a teacher, the most meaningful parts of the conference, how many sessions they attended, and if they planned to attend future conferences. In addition to the surveys, I conducted semi-structured interviews as needed to better understand the meaning of their written comments.

Data collection and analysis was ongoing, recursive, and inductive (Strauss & Corbin 1990; Ely et al. 1991). Throughout the study, I reviewed the data (including all field notes, surveys collected, and transcriptions of interview recordings) and made annotations. By doing this, I established a set of initial categories and

subcategories that arose from and made sense of my data. In order to determine the categories, I reread the data, trying out tentative categories and changing them until all the meaningful information was categorized (Ely et al. 1991).

I made a preliminary check on the reliability of my data categories: The data were read by a colleague who also had expertise in ethnographic research. This reader also annotated the texts and suggested possible categories. These categories were then compared and discussed and refined into what became my final categories of analysis.

Meaningful data, that which continually recurred among participants and across data types, was then coded according to these final categories. To analyze each category, I created tables that organized data from each data source. These tables helped to uncover patterns across participants and data types. When evidence of a pattern became apparent for one of the data sources, I was able to compare these findings with others and to modify my findings accordingly. At several points during my analysis, my colleague and I independently read and coded the data to check the reliability of my coding. I found that we consistently coded the data with the same codes, and, therefore, I believe that my analysis is reliable.

With the data sorted into categories, I studied each reiteratively and identified key concepts and themes related to the effects of conference attendance, including pre-service teaching candidates' beliefs and attitudes about professional development and conferences and about their identities as teachers (Strauss & Corbin 1990). I used this as a means to organize the data and to "tease out" the meaning of my findings (Ely et al. 1991).

Findings

Resources and Networking

Before attending their first NCTE conference, the teaching candidates all expressed, both verbally and in their surveys, excitement about attending. Besides traveling to a new city, the most frequent reason why they said they were excited was the prospect of acquiring new resources. These resources included ideas for classroom strategies, activities and materials, as well as "free stuff" such as books and posters to fill the walls of their future classrooms. A few candidates also mentioned that they would like to meet some of the authors who had written the texts they had studied in their professional classes.

In addition to gaining resources, the candidates frequently said that they were looking forward to the opportunity to "network", which they later

explained as an opportunity to get to know their fellow university students better. They hoped that by "networking" they would build relationships that might be beneficial to them in the future as they started their new teaching positions. They believed that, by better knowing candidates who were at the same place in their careers, they might be able to form support groups to help manage the demands and stress that comes with teaching in their own classrooms.

According to the post-surveys, the candidates did indeed accumulate many teaching ideas and resources. However, the tone of their responses when talking about these resources differed from the pre-survey. Instead of simply listing their desire to gather general activities, strategies, and materials to use "someday" in some abstract way, they described specific ideas that they had learned, how they connected to what they knew, and how they might apply them. And, in some cases, candidates were able to use these resources in their teaching in an immediate way. For example, one student discussed how her thinking and practice developed after attending a session led by Jeffrey Wilhelm, whose work we had studied in our English Education program.

Wilhelm was discussing the different purposes for reading. I had previously thought about it, but not in the complex way that it was explored in the session. It focused on "joy reading" and reading for pleasure. . . . [Later, after the conference,] I tried to focus my students on finding pleasure in their reading. I found that it helped many of my readers become engaged. I was able to do this, and continue trying to implement more of the theory, because NCTE led me to good resources. . . .

Even though this student had studied in classes the very concepts that Wilhelm talked about in his session at NCTE, by attending the conference, she had the opportunity to discuss and think more deeply about what she was just beginning to understand in new and powerful ways. She was then more prepared and confident about applying this knowledge to her teaching.

In addition to gaining resources at the conference, multiple candidates stated that they were "so excited" about the friendships they made with their fellow university students. Several candidates said that they not only got to know better the candidates who they previously had interacted with, but also bonded with candidates who they had barely talked to before in their professional classes. They said that they had not expected these totally new relationships, but they were greatly valued. One candidate later said that

his “best friends and colleagues happened at the conference.”

Besides learning about the “networks” that developed, as described in the candidates’ surveys and interviews, I witnessed these networks firsthand on campus. For instance, after attending the conferences, several candidates began meeting to plan for their lessons for their professional classes. Others formed “coffee shop support groups” during student teaching. I know that at least one of the groups continued after they graduated and obtained teaching jobs around the state. The members regularly talk online and get together in person “whenever they can.”

All the candidates indicated that they greatly valued this opportunity to “network” and that the conference trip was a unique opportunity to make this happen. As one candidate explained:

I really appreciated the chance to “talk shop” with many of my [anonymized name] university colleagues and to build my relationships with them. After all, conferences are great for professional development, but they are isolated experiences that happen once or twice a year. My colleagues and the professional relationships I build with them will be how I bounce off ideas and hear about new things in my day-to-day teaching life, and I think it’s incredibly meaningful that I was able to start doing that now, before I’m teaching.

For this student and others, the value of the conference was not just the opportunity to hear new ideas and to gather materials. They recognize that the relationships that they made are beneficial to their teaching careers.

Inspiration

One thing that the candidates seemed surprised to gain by attending the national conference was inspiration. Some of the candidates’ comments were as follows:

The conference gave me the opportunity to immerse myself with experienced professional teachers that had lots of knowledge and enthusiasm to share. It was rejuvenating to see such excitement in my content area and be surrounded by people who have the same excitement for teaching as I do.

I’m actually excited for this again! Not that I had lost interest, but this was a real rekindling of the fire.

It was inspiring and comforting to be surrounded by teachers and leaders in education that I look up to.

I have never seen so much passion in one place, and I wish I could have that more often.

As the current instructor for many of these candidates, I witnessed this new inspiration in action. Several candidates who were taking my section of the advanced methods course at the time of the conference completely changed the focus of their three-week unit plan projects, which is the final assessment for the class. They chose to do this even though they had been working on their former projects for weeks and only had a week left before the project was due. One of these candidates explained that when he first chose the topic for his unit, he was “a little uninspired” and “just wanted to get it done.” He also wanted to “pick something safe ... something that [he] had been taught before as a student in English class; something more traditional.” After attending the conference, he remarked that he was “so excited” to apply what he learned at the conference to his unit. He wanted “to scrap” his unit and instead focus it on issues of social justice. He said, “I really want to get them thinking and asking their own questions,” and he wanted his unit to “mean something to them, not just fit a bunch of standards.” Other candidates said that, while they were not changing their units completely, they were going to include more variety. In particular, they wanted to use a wider range of methods and strategies. These included more creative ways to engage students, more active discussions, and the use of technology (especially web-based technology).

In general, the candidates seemed more excited and committed to the profession after attending the conference. One student said, “It was so easy to see myself, in the future as a teacher, coming to the NCTE conference.” Another said that she “learned from so many professional educators who were clearly passionate about their career and I’m lucky to have that experience so early on.”

Confidence in Their Preparation

Before attending the conference many of the teaching candidates expressed concern about being prepared to enter the teaching profession. One candidate wrote in her survey “I still feel like I am more of student than a teacher.” She was not alone in her feeling. The lowest average score on the pre-conference survey was when candidates were asked if they felt “prepared to discuss issues in the field with teaching professionals.” In addition, prior to attending the conference, candidates frequently used the phrase “real teacher” to differentiate themselves from working teachers. Most of the candidates felt that they were not yet “real teachers” and feared that they would

not be perceived as legitimate professionals at NCTE or in the field.

Part of the reason the candidates felt that they were still “just students” and not ready to interact with working teachers was their perception of what constituted a “real teacher.” The pre-conference data indicated that the candidates believed that “real teachers” were not only more experienced, but also had much greater overall knowledge about students and how to teach them. The candidates were concerned that what they learned in their professional education courses and fieldwork might be lacking. Their insecurities left them feeling under prepared and somewhat like “imposters.”

Because of these insecurities and their fear of being “found out,” many of the candidates indicated that they felt wary of their ability to add to the conversations that would take place at the conference. They were not sure if what they learned in their college experiences had practical applications for the classroom. This added to their concern about being prepared to be teachers and to “fit in” at NCTE.

In the post-conference surveys, however, candidates reported that their ability to talk with professional educators about issues in the field greatly increased. In fact, this survey category had the largest increase in averages, with a 40% increase in the scores. One reason for this increase was that candidates said they found that they were more knowledgeable about the issues being discussed at the conference than they originally thought. Once they realized this, they were more confident in their ability to interact with educators that they perceived as “real teachers.” In the post-conference survey, a pre-service candidate explained:

Actually going out among my colleagues, hearing their ideas, and occasionally having ideas that I may have had valued and validated, has given me the confidence of knowing that I have many different sources for ideas, and that eventually, I can help others the same way that they have helped and will help me.

Like the candidate above, many of the teaching candidates were excited to see that the ideas demonstrated at that conference were similar to and built on what they had learned through their coursework. Another candidate said that it was “so reassuring that the information in the sessions and roundtable was the same thing [we have] been discussing in classes at [anonymized name] university.” Having their knowledge and experience validated led to an increase in their

confidence that they were prepared to take on the role of teacher.

In addition to feeling more confident about their teacher preparation, after they attended the conference, many candidates said that they gained more confidence in their own abilities and identities as teachers by interacting directly with “real teachers.” As one student noted, “Attending this conference was vital to helping me feel like a real professional educator. ... There wasn’t a single time during the conference that I was treated like a student; to everyone there I was a teacher.” The acknowledgment of their status as a legitimate member of the field was a common theme throughout the post-conference survey responses. Several of the candidates happily noted that other teachers in attendance were surprised to find that they were still students and were impressed that they were already attending NCTE. For the pre-service teachers, who were worried about being singled out as students, these responses validated their presence and their identities as teachers.

Building on the idea of feeling “more like a teacher,” several of the candidates expressed an increased confidence in having chosen the right field. For instance, in the pre-conference surveys, one candidate voiced her concerns about her preparation and if she made the right choice in becoming a teacher. She said she now felt “like a *beginning teacher* who is getting their feet wet.” Another wrote, “I feel more confident that I am on the right track. I think the conference has helped me see that I am asking the right questions.” Later in an interview, she explained that she realized that she did not “have to have all the answers to start teaching.” She believed that she just needed to know “what questions to ask and where to look.”

It is important to note that while most students felt more confident about themselves as teachers after attending NCTE, two students said that the experience made them realize that they were “in the wrong major.” As one of these students said, “I loved the conference and I love the subject (English). I just know I don’t want to be a teacher. I really admire teachers, but I just know that I can’t be one.” Overall, however, attending the conference helped most candidates feel like they had made the right career choice, and, while they did not know everything, they felt confident in their ability to grow and succeed in the profession.

Community

As shown above, before attending the conference, many candidates said they had doubts about themselves as future teachers. As one student said in her survey, “I have my moments where I feel incredibly under qualified.” While part of the candidates’ doubts about their ability to become teachers seemed to stem from their perceived lack of preparation to teach in “real” schools, another part came from their inability to see themselves within the profession. Only two candidates indicated that they thought that attending the conference might help to change this. One of these candidates, Abby, said that she hoped to “get insight into [her] career “and “what it means to be a teacher.” Another, Lisa, stated, “I expect the largest/most significantly changed element will be me ... I hope to feel more like a teacher, like I fit in.”

None of the other candidates seemed to expect that they would experience or become part of a larger teaching community by attending the national conference. This pre-conference finding is significant because, after attending the conference, this was the number one thing that the candidates talked about in their post-surveys and interviews.

After the conference, candidates indicated their surprise that they had so many meaningful conversations with practicing teachers and how important that was to them. As one student said, “I think getting to have conversations with experienced teachers was the most meaningful part of the conference because I was able to hear so many perspectives and stories.”

The candidates’ interactions with practicing teachers had two effects. First, candidates indicated that they felt more a part of and less intimidated by the profession. Lisa, the student discussed above, said, “Overall, my interactions with teachers were fantastic and made me feel like I was really part of the teaching culture.” Other candidates wrote the following:

As far as NCTE, it definitely helped and made me see how wonderful and accepting the teaching community is.

I feel like I am part of a community now. There are so many teachers out there that are willing to share ideas and help out one another – it is a great feeling.

Teachers were so open to expressing themselves as friends to me, which I hadn’t expected simply because I am currently still a student. It was nice to get a feel of camaraderie and understanding from the teachers around me.

Taking part in the many round table conversations I sat in on gave me so many ideas and made me feel like part of the critical conversation.

Engaging in extended conversations with practicing teachers also had the effect of making the candidates “feel more like a teacher.” Abby wrote,

Before I attended the conference, I felt more like a student than a teacher. However, I felt really immersed with other teachers during the conference. ... I am grateful for the opportunity to learn more about the profession and that I can finally feel a part of it.

Other candidates reacted similarly:

This experience has helped me feel more like a future teacher.

I felt like a pre-service teacher sponge [rather than a student]. I was looking to absorb as much valuable information as possible to incorporate into my future classroom.

I don’t feel like a teacher, but I feel a lot closer to being one than before I went to the conference.

Personally, I felt like a teacher when I ran into one of my high school teachers and we discussed the presentations we attended.

After attending this conference, I feel I have a much more concrete idea of what I will be like as a teacher.

I feel way more professional and prepared to be a real teacher at this point, because now I know my strengths and weaknesses about teaching and was able to focus the time I spent at the conference trying to improve my teaching while also exploring my interests.

I feel much more like a teacher now.

This sense of community, and the candidates’ visions of themselves as teachers that resulted, may be unique to their attending not only a conference, but the NCTE convention. Most of these candidates were advanced in the teaching program and had had significant field experiences. Several of them had even attended smaller conferences. However, even with these past experiences, only two of these candidates said that they felt like teachers or part of the profession prior to attending the NCTE conference. Afterwards, however, this number had risen significantly.

Seeing the bigger picture beyond their classrooms

One of the other themes that I found in the data was the shift in candidates’ perspectives from individual classroom to national issues of education. Before attending the conference, a

candidate wrote, "I hope to get ideas to use in my future classroom." Most of the candidates similarly focused on their vision of their "future classroom" and how they could obtain "strategies and materials that would add to that space." Overall, they had a very individualized notion of how they could benefit from the conference and what it meant to be a teacher. Few students indicated that they wanted to learn more about national issues or the larger profession. One such student said, "I want to learn more about the issues surrounding national and local schools and be able to know what my own opinions are."

Although only a couple candidates expressed the above sentiment before attending NCTE, several candidates discussed this idea afterwards. In one of the pre-conference surveys a student noted, "One thing that I learned was that all teachers are dealing with what I am." Another student stated, "I feel like I understand the field better now that I've been to the conference and I'm more confident in my ability to find a place within it."

As the candidates became more confident in their own knowledge and began to feel like part of a larger community, they were able to look beyond the individuality of a single classroom and see the larger issues that were taking place throughout the field. This realization then led to a change in the views candidates had of national conferences. As one student explained, "I understand the importance of conferences and will continue to utilize my resources to continue to become the best teacher that I can." Another student said, "From this I gained an appreciation for the necessity of professional conferences for educators. This was an invaluable experience and I plan to attend in the future." The candidates became more aware of and better understood the importance of staying informed on national issues. They were also impressed by the fact that these issues were what "real teachers actually talk about." Many candidates indicated that conferences were an excellent way to keep themselves updated on future shifts in the field and that conferences were a way to "figure out" the implications these shifts could have on them as teachers and their future students. All the candidates said that they planned on attending conferences in the future, and several of the graduates are attending NCTE this year.

Conclusion and Implications

As English educators, we strive to prepare our teaching candidates to enter the profession as

knowledgeable and confident English/Language Arts educators. However, as my study has shown, candidates might feel more prepared and connected to a larger community of educators if they engage in professional development opportunities, such as attending conferences, before leaving their teacher education programs. Candidates might also benefit more if these professional development experiences occur outside of our classrooms and even beyond our campuses.

A sense of confidence may be important because new teachers are entering one of the most demanding work environments where teachers are loudly and, I would argue, mostly unfairly, being blamed for the so-called failure of America's public schools. Unrealistic federal and state expectations, funding cuts, and lack of influence and respect often can overwhelm teachers, both new and veteran. This can be especially true for teachers if they feel isolated in their classrooms.

Teachers' job dissatisfaction is taking its toll as qualified teachers leave the profession and teaching positions go unfilled. A recent U.S. Department of Education report (2010) surveyed teachers who had left the profession. They asked the former teachers who indicated that they were more satisfied with their new, non-teaching positions why that was the case. Several answers stood out. Many former teachers shared that they preferred their new positions because they had opportunities for things like professional development, learning from colleagues, recognition and support, influence over workplace policies and practices, and autonomy over their own work. These were all things that they found lacking in their teaching careers.

Conference attendance, as well as other forms of meaningful professional development, could provide the very opportunities that current teachers are saying that this profession is lacking. If attending NCTE is a powerful experience for ELA teaching candidates, then practicing teachers might also benefit. They could find spaces to share with and learn from colleagues. They could feel supported and valued as their voices are heard and their ideas validated. By sharing ideas and hearing about and developing new teaching theories and strategies, they hopefully could take more control of their teaching practices and influence policy in their schools and communities. They could also feel less isolated and empowered, which might lead to them finding more job satisfaction. Whether these possible outcomes will occur is a place for future study.

This study found that English/Language Arts teaching candidates do benefit from attending conferences. They often feel more prepared, more inspired, and more a part of a professional community than they might feel by completing their teacher education programs alone. Above all, they feel more like teachers. NEA states that “professional development should be required throughout the career of education support professionals.” I would argue that while teaching candidates are not yet working teachers, they are part of the profession and should be a part of these types of conferences. We should see them as early professionals as well as students.

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