Investigating Instruction for Non-Traditional Students Using Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire

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Abstract

As educators, we strive for continuous improvement in order to make our instruction more meaningful and engaging for all learners. Brookfield (1998; 2015) believes that critical reflective practices allow practitioners to thoughtfully and carefully consider their actions while focusing on the needs of the students. According to Brookfield (1995), educators who provide opportunities to reflect through journaling and interactive engagements are best able to meet the needs of the learners, thus making theory and practice, and the scholarship of teaching and learning, most beneficial for all. The purpose of this study was to determine what, if any, instructional methods impacted pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding engagement and support. In addition, the impact of the instructor's teaching practices within the classroom were also investigated. The following research question guided this study: How do students perceive the level of engagement and support fostered within an undergraduate college course as determined by the use of the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ)? Participants, all of whom were pre-service teachers, were given Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire (1995) during the course. The initial survey was used to determine their perceptions of

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the impact of instruction and learning methods. The second administration of the survey was used to ascertain if changes made in instruction based on initial survey results helped to positively impact student engagement and support as perceived by the pre-service teachers.

Keywords: Critical Incident Questionnaire, non-traditional students, pre-service teachers, student engagement, level of support, instructional practices

Introduction

Every instructor must teach course content, but it is the delivery of that content that can significantly determine students' level of engagement and understanding. When students are actively engaged within the classroom (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Russell, 2006), authentic learning can take place (McDonough, 2014). Course evaluations are generally conducted at the end of a term for most college classes, which does not allow for immediate changes to take place. Therefore, administering surveys identifying specific attributes of the class and the instructor's teaching practices could assist in making necessary modifications while the course is still in session (McDonnell & Dodd, 2017). These changes, in turn, could enhance learning outcomes and empower student voice within the learning process.

Instructors, across disciplines and content areas, aspire to have students who achieve academically, personally, and professionally, spurred by a deep, intrinsic motivation to learn (Fink, 2007). Although this desire is associated with all career-oriented college majors, due to the ever-increasing need to recruit and retain quality educators, it is exceedingly critical for instructors who teach pre-service teachers. While the U.S. Department of Education (2015) finds that fewer college students are pursuing degrees in education, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2014) show that due to a growing K-12 population within the United States, teacher hires will increase 29 percent between 2011 and 2022. The role of instructors within teacher educator preparation programs, therefore, is paramount, as there is a great need to effectively prepare the next generation of teachers for the profession.

One of the most important aspects of teaching within K-12 settings is the ability to understand the systemic approaches to reading and language arts. Research indicates that since pre-service teachers are not able to naturally possess needed characteristics of an exemplar reading teacher, careful configuration of the reading methods course is essential in ensuring pre-service teachers are prepared (Griffith et al., 2010). Additionally, in this age of acute accountability, it is imperative that pre-service teachers are cognizant of the processes associated with planning, implementing, and assessing reading and writing. Yet, while pre-service teachers must develop such knowledge from educator preparation providers, they must also understand how to transfer this knowledge into their own behaviors and instructional practices within their classrooms (Ruben, 1999). Therefore, educator preparation providers should engage in reflective practices to inform their instruction and support pre-service teachers' ability to transport theory into practice.

At one private university in the southeastern part of North America, the authors of this study wanted to investigate the level of engagement and support perceived by pre-service teachers in a reading methods course as measured by Brookfield's (1995) Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ). The CIQ allowed the instructor to determine the pre-service teachers' learning, engagement, and the impact the instructor's teaching had on their classroom learning, or lack thereof. This study took place within a language arts course required for undergraduates seeking a degree in elementary education (with a certification emphasis in Pre-K through 5th grade). The ultimate goal of this study was for the instructor to determine pre-service teachers' perceptions of engagement and support, during classroom learning, in order to modify course structures as needed. Furthermore, pre-service teachers must receive optimal instruction, must be given time to engage with colleagues, and must be given opportunities to hone reflective practices in order to effectively apply pedagogical content knowledge and skills from the college classroom to the elementary classroom.

Literature Review

Current Teaching Practices in a Reading Methods Course

Guidelines have been offered to assist teachers when preparing children in the reading classroom. The National Reading Panel (NRP) identified five essential components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Ten years later, many states adopted the Common Core State Standards/English Language Arts and Literacy (CCSS/ELA; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). The International Literacy Association also provides Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals. These standards focus on "the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for effective educational practice in a specific role and highlight contemporary research and evidence-based practices in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and leadership" (International Literacy Association, 2017). The NRP report, the CCSS/ELA, and the ILA standards guide what is taught in teacher preparation reading methods classes.

In order to prepare pre-service teachers in reading methods courses, appropriate instruction needs to be provided in the areas of planning, instructing, and assessing. L'Allier and Elish-Piper (2007) express, "Teachers can use active engagement strategies to help pre-service teachers interact meaningfully with assigned readings for literacy methods courses" (p. 338). Through active learning, pre-service teachers can explore texts through discussions and group activities, thereby supporting the application of their learning into future classrooms.

Application of Knowledge

Providing time and space for pre-service teachers to apply their current knowledge of instructional strategies could be beneficial to teachers. Pre-service teachers need a hands-on environment in order to apply new, critical knowledge (Burns & Danyluk, 2017). L'Allier and Elish-Piper (2007) found that

> one of the most effective ways to help teacher candidates understand, value, and thoughtfully
> apply research-based practices in their clinical experiences, student teaching, and ultimately in

their own classrooms is to have them experience and apply the strategies in the coursework in their teacher education program (p. 338-339).

Therefore, it is beneficial for pre-service teachers to have opportunities to apply their knowledge prior to facing a K-12 classroom.

Reflective Practices

Although effective teaching can be viewed by students and instructors differently depending on the goals of the lesson, Brown and Atkins (2006) explain that, "in considering research on effective teaching, it is important to consider successful teaching strategies in the context of what lecturers and students value" (p. 5). In order to ascertain what is valued among students during class sessions, instructors can encourage students to critically reflect on the teaching methods used during the class session and the engagement that took place during the class session. "Critical reflective practice is a process of inquiry involving practitioners in trying to discover, and research, the assumptions that frame how they work" (Brookfield, 1998, p. 197). Although specific experiences within the teaching field are exponentially different, there are themes that occur within each educator's realm of teaching (Brookfield, 1998).

The Critical Incident Questionnaire

In order to gauge what is taking place in the classroom in regard to the instructor's teaching and the students' learning, Brookfield (1995; 2015) provides a tool, the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ), to track the impact of teaching and learning taking place in the classroom. Critical incidents are authentic ways of examining situations occurring within the classroom (Tripp, 1993). As a result of critical incidents and events, instructors are capable of critically reflecting, thus making the CIQ a qualitative instrument capable of determining "critical reflection and critical incidents during the process of learning" (Gilstrap & Dupree, 2008, p. 423). A variety of disciplines have attempted to administer the CIQ to provide information in relation to teaching and learning taking place in the class (Linstrum, Ballard, & Shelby, 2012; Jacobs, 2015; Phelan, 2012; Gilstrap & Dupree, 2008). The use of the CIQ has assisted instructors in reflecting upon their own teaching. In addition, such deep reflection on critical incidents

supports the instructor's ability to build pre-service teachers' capacity to thoughtfully engage in the action of self-reflection (Jacobs, 2015)**.**

Previous studies on students' perceptions have primarily focused on traditional undergraduate students (Bjornsen, 2000; Peck, Chilvers, & Lincoln, 2010; Odom, 2015). Contrarily, there is limited research surrounding the level of engagement among non-traditional undergraduate students and the support needed to enhance their learning experience. As the non-traditional student population rises (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), the voices of these students need to be heard. Brookfield (2015) explains the usefulness of the CIQ.

> Using the CIQ gives you a quick insight into what's working and what's misfiring, what you should keep and what you should discard, and how different students experience the same classroom activity in varying ways. It also provides you with running commentary on the emotional tenor of each class you deal with. (p. 34).

Having information regarding "the emotional tenor of each class" (p. 34) as well as what is working and what is not working allows the instructor to monitor learning and engagement on an ongoing basis.

Current Course Design

Prior to the study, the course design incorporated various teaching methods. Classes consisted of lecture and hands-on approaches to learning. Lectures consisted of topics regarding those of the essential elements of reading and writing instruction. Hands-on approaches to learning consisted of the pre-service teachers teaching researched-based best practices to their peers as well as engaging in components of the writing process. The pre-service teachers were also provided opportunities to explore teaching practices with their peers during class time. The instructor provided a PowerPoint to supplement the content being taught.

Methodology

The researchers sought to investigate the following question: How do students perceive the level of engagement and support fostered within an undergraduate college course as determined through the use of the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ)? A qualitative approach was used in this study. Brookfield's CIQ (1995; 2015) was used to determine "how students are experiencing their learning and [the instructor's] teaching" (p. 114). Brookfield's CIQ consists of five questions: At what moment in class did you feel most engaged with what was happening? At what moment in class were you most distanced from what was happening? What action that anyone (instructor or student) took during class did you find most affirming or helpful? What action that anyone took during class did you find most puzzling or confusing? What about the class surprised you the most? The results to each of these questions were coded accordingly to specific themes derived from the data.

Participants

The participants of the study are currently in a non-traditional, undergraduate teacher-educator program at a private institution. At the time of the data collection, the pre-service teachers (*n=15*) ranged in ages from 25 to 47; the choice to use these participants was purposeful, as critical reflective practices have been proven to be helpful in adult education courses and with non-traditional students (Mezirow, 1990). Approximately half of the participants are currently employed as paraprofessionals within local school systems. While not all participants are currently full or part time employees within elementary schools, a large majority of these pre-service teachers have had experience working with children in some capacity. At the time of the study, six students were paraprofessionals, one student was a certified paraprofessional but never accepted a position, one student was a substitute teacher (and was previously a paraprofessional prior to becoming a substitute teacher), one student was a teacher of record in a non-public school setting, two students were the teacher of record in a pre-kindergarten classroom, and one student was an assistant in a childcare facility. The other students did not indicate their professional status on the demographic survey administered.

Procedures

The Institutional Review Board approved all data collection and consent procedures for the research project. Each researcher gained research certification prior to receiving IRB approval. One of the researchers was also the instructor of the course. The researchers employed a qualitative design (Cresswell, 2005), collecting data from the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ; Brookfield, 1995). Brookfield's approval to use the CIQ is granted in *The Skillful Teacher: On Techniques, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom.*

Purposeful sampling was used (Patton, 2002) to gain participants for the study. This class of non-traditional students met for an eight-week session instead of a traditional 16-week semester. This class was purposefully selected because the participants were scheduled to meet once a week for eight weeks in the evening for at least four hours and forty-five minutes. In addition to face-to-face class time, students were also expected to provide at least an additional 75 minutes of online classwork time to be completed prior to coming to class the following week. Brookfield (1995; 2015) suggests that the CIQ be administered at the end of class each week. However, due to the time constraints associated with an eight-week session (e.g. limited face-to-face time to cover necessary content and multiple mandatory online assignments), the researchers took a different approach. The CIQ was conducted two times during the eight weeks and was administered as an online assignment. The CIQ was submitted through the University's learning management system.

At the onset of the study, the pre-service teachers were provided with an overview of the study as well as an informed consent form which also provided an itemized description of the study. They were encouraged to ask clarifying questions. Ultimately, fifteen students signed the consent form. For those students who did not sign the consent form, their information was not included in the study.

Results

The researchers aimed to explore how students perceive the level of engagement and support fostered within an undergraduate college course as determined through the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) (Brookfield, 1995; 2015). The pre-service teachers expressed specific information concerning each of the questions presented to them in the CIQ. This allowed the qualitative data to be coded and categorized into specific themes (Saldaña, 2016). The responses to each question were reviewed by the researchers and were then coded. After coding was applied to the responses, rich discussions among the researchers took place to describe the coding and an explanation for each code was provided. These discussions were significant in ensuring that the "meaning of codes did not shift" (Richards & Richards, 1994 p. 152).

Triangulation of the data was used to ensure there was consistency and to also attempt to identify researcher biases (Merriam & Risdell, 2016). The questions administered on the first and second CIQ and the themes which emerged from the coded data are listed in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Administered 1st Critical Incident Questionnaire Themes

Question	Themes
At what moment in class did you feel most engaged with what was happening?	Collaborative and hands-on activities, writing time, literature circle
At what moment in class were you most distanced from what was happening?	Did not get disengaged, edTPA discussions, at the end of class, during PowerPoint slides
What action that anyone (teacher or student) took during class did you find most affirming or helpful?	Contributions of my peers and the professor, writing time, professor explanations
What action that anyone took during class did you find most puzzling or confusing?	No puzzling or confusing moments
What about the class surprised you the most? (This could be about your own reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurs.)	Writing activities

Regarding the first question on the questionnaire, "At what moment in class did you feel most engaged with what was happening?" one pre-service teacher stated, "I feel most

engaged when we are up moving around and collaborating with our classmates. When we write down our ideas on chart paper with our table mates and share, I am truly engaged." Another participant stated,

> *When we worked as a group to write down ways to encourage students to write more. This gave me time to reflect on what I had learned about teaching children to write, how to encourage writing, and time to discuss writing tools and application with classmates. I also enjoyed hearing all the other groups' suggestions on how to encourage student writing.*

Question Two of the questionnaire inquired if the students felt distanced in the classroom. One of the themes noted in the data was that students felt distanced toward the end of class. A participant replied, "By the end of the class, but it was more about being tired than about the content of the lesson." Another student replied, "Toward the end of the class, I become more tired." Another theme that emerged from this second question, regarding feeling distanced in the classroom, included edTPA discussions. Because edTPA is a consequential performance-based assessment for pre-service teachers within this state, it was a topic often discussed within class. However, since these pre-service teachers had not started the edTPA process for teaching certification, these conversations did not seem as relevant to them, and they felt disengaged in the dialog and had less to offer during these discussions.

The next question focused on an action that anyone (teacher or student) took during class that was affirming or helpful. One student stated that they find "good quality questions" from peers to be extremely helpful, adding, "I find that sometimes I will be thinking the same thing, but I haven't yet formed what I am thinking into a proper question." Another student said, "Asking questions and sharing our writing." Another student stated, "Listening to the opinions of my peers and the advice of my professor always gives me hope. It's a lot of work and gathering together in hope and possibility is always helpful." In regard to writing, one student stated, "I find the [writing] journals very helpful. The whole process of the read-aloud and using that theme to collect ideas for our [writing] journal is very helpful."

The fourth question addressed an act that was puzzling or confusing. The overarching theme was that there were no puzzling or confusing moments. Although it was not a theme, one student expressed that, "The most puzzling for me was the literature circles. I have never experienced one before. However, I am grateful for the video and [the instructor] for explaining it further." Another response from a student indicated student conversations can be disrupting. The student stated, "I find it very distracting when I am listening to you or another student tell us something, and another group is having their own conversations."

The final question on the questionnaire examined what surprised the students the most in the class. One theme that arose was writing. One student mentioned, "I was very surprised that I wanted to share my writing piece last week. I am usually very reserved about my writing, but I felt comfortable with this group and convinced myself to share." Another student expressed, "I was surprised by all of the great, imaginative, and fun hooks that my classmates wrote. It was great to see the skills that classmates have and the help available if you need it.

Table 2.   Administered 2nd Critical Incident Questionnaire Themes

Question	Themes
At what moment in class did you feel most engaged with what was happening?	Collaborating, writing time
At what moment in class were you most distanced from what was happening?	Did not get disengaged, literature circle, edTPA
What action that anyone (teacher or student) took during class did you find most affirming or helpful?	Feedback, classmates sharing
What action that anyone took during class did you find most puzzling or confusing?	CIQ responses
What about the class surprised you the most? (This could be about your own reactions to what went on, something that someone did, or anything else that occurs.)	Videos demonstrating teaching practices, dispositions of classmates

Similar themes emerged across the first and second CIQ. For instance, in both CIQs participants in the study indicated that they felt the most engaged while "working collaboratively." One student explained that, "I felt most engaged with collaborating with

my group members for the project and lesson plan." Another student stated, "I felt most engaged when my classmates and I were meeting for our literature circle."

The second question asked participants to explain a time in class when they felt distance. The second CIQ indicated the same theme; the participants did not get disengaged or the question was not answered by the participants. One student expressed that, "I didn't have a moment that I was distant from the class because lately the classes have seemed action-packed and we are constantly learning something new during the entire session." Contrarily, and also noted within the initial CIQ results, some participants expressed their disengagement with edTPA.

The next part of the questionnaire inquired about any action someone took that was affirming or helpful. One student stated, "Class discussions are helpful for me." Whereas another student commented on the feedback that was received regarding the lesson plan. This student stated, "Well, I got my grade and comments back from my lesson plan, so that was helpful, and spending time with my group having discourse about what activities were coming up…[was] cool…" Another student explained how peer-sharing within the class was helpful. This student stated, "I always like to hear stories that my other classmates share about their experiences with teaching or assignments. I think it helps me to know that we are all in the same boat and going through the same thing. I like to see their work and their projects, because it gives me new ideas."

The fourth question of the CIQ invited participants to elaborate on an action that someone took that they found puzzling or confusing. Many participants articulated that there was "nothing that puzzled or confused them" the previous week. However, two participants expressed insight regarding responses on the previous CIQ. In examining their responses, some participants took offense to the perceptions of their colleagues and how some of their peers were speaking about other class members. One student expressed,

> *I think it was when we were reading the CIQs that were posted from the last issued one. This was*
> *because it was the rudeness that was presented; not that they had a problem, but how they felt*
> *that it was okay to be rude while calling others rude and unprofessional. This didn't sit well with*
> *me because if you feel that people are being disruptive, then it's a way for you to acknowledge*

> *and address it in a professional manner. Who knew that they were being disruptive, especially being that we have all been in classes together and this has never been an issue.*

Another student stated that she felt confused when "everyone was upset about the results of the last CIQ. CIQs are our opinion of what we feel is going on [in the class]." These comments helped shape an understanding of how these pre-service teachers felt about the professionalism displayed within the classroom; this information will guide disposition practices in future courses.

The final question of the CIQ encouraged participants to expand on something that may have surprised them. This 'surprise' could be something that took place, something that someone did, or anything else that occurred. One student commented,

> *I really enjoyed watching the videos for our online component. I know that all teachers run their classes differently, but I loved the video about [the teacher's] fifth grade class and how he went about teaching the students theory and how he worked with the students individually on their goals during silent reading. He was just so cool about it and very encouraging to his students.*

Another student also noted the video as being surprising. This student, too, was able to gain knowledge from the video presented to assist with developing knowledge needed to become a teacher.

Immediate and Future Changes

While some data gathered from the first CIQ provided the researchers with meaningful information to make immediate changes to teaching practices, other data will be used to enhance future course design. The immediate changes were made to enhance the learning opportunities of the pre-service teachers without making any changes to, or taking any deterrent from, the course objectives. While the results of this study showed a mixture of areas in which the participants felt engaged and distanced from others and what was taking place in the classroom, the instructor worked to enhance hands-on activities, meaningful and deliberate collaboration, and time for authentic reflections. Fink (2013) offers a taxonomy of significant learning which is made up of specific categories, such as foundational knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn; all of which have a direct impact on the learner (pgs.

34-37). In order to redesign the course, Fink's taxonomy of significant learning was essential in guiding the immediate changes such as ensuring the course "challenged the students to significant kinds of learning" and "using active forms of learning" (p. 32).

One of the themes noted in the first CIQ was participants' fatigue toward the end of class sessions. One immediate change that took place was the implementation of more engaging tasks throughout class sessions, especially toward the end of the agenda. The theme of being tired at the end of class was not noted in the second CIQ.

Another theme that was noted concerning disengagement was weekly PowerPoint presentations. An immediate change that took place was posting the PowerPoint on the learning management system, so all students could access the information beyond class time. In addition, the instructor increased time spent on each PowerPoint slide; this additional time provided for more questioning and discourse, thus allowing the pre-service teachers to become increasingly engaged in their own learning.

Since the class session follows a non-traditional calendar, meeting eight weeks instead of a regular 16-week traditional semester, it would be meaningful to conduct the CIQ more regularly. In this non-traditional format, two classes are compacted into one class meeting and more information is conveyed in a shorter timeframe. In order to have a truer reading of the non-traditional students are experiencing their learning and the instructor's teaching (Brookfield, 2015), administering the CIQ at different points in the same class rather than weeks apart could be beneficial for the instructor to gauge learning and the impact of his or her instruction.

It may be effective if the students are encouraged to elaborate on each response by providing an explanation of "why" or "how." Encouraging students to state opinions, while giving insight into the "whys" and "hows" of these opinions, can help to better prepare these pre-service teachers for working with other educators in the future. Keefer (2009) explains that an adaptation of the CIQ may be in order in which the questionnaire could "work best across education and population levels without the need for extensive instruction, while still getting results that seem indicative of the learner statuses" (p. 180). Therefore, in order for the class members to elaborate and provide explanations, an adaptation may be needed.

After noting how some students became confused by the way their peers responded to various questions on the CIQ, the researchers see the importance of incorporating professional disposition discussions into future courses. Teaching is a profession, and it is important that we model and expect appropriate professional standards of conduct within the college classroom setting.

The goal is also to continue to engage students in their learning processes. Because this is an evening course and the majority of these non-traditional students work during the day, fatigue is inevitable, especially toward the end of the course session. By analyzing the responses of the CIQ, we recognize that activity, engagement, and discussion are effective teaching practices in reading courses for pre-service teachers. For this reason, we are working to change the curricula to include more hands-on practitioner activities throughout the class to maintain the students' active engagement. Using the gradual release approach of "I do, we do, you do" (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) will allow pre-service teachers explicit opportunities to learn, practice, and model information presented within the class sessions.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine what, if any, instructional methods impacted how the students felt regarding being engaged and supported as well as determining the impact of the instructor's teaching practices within the classroom. It is vital that instructors consistently monitor the impact of their instructional methods while fostering an environment where each student is supported throughout the learning process and remains engaged. Although what takes place in the classroom can be viewed differently by students (Brookfield, 1996), it is important to attempt to interpret the teaching and learning taking place. Gaining necessary feedback from the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ), Brookfield (1998) explains that students may feel reluctant to freely provide feedback. However, when a positive relationship has been established between the instructor and the student, the undergraduate may feel more open to providing feedback.

After each administration of the CIQ, the instructor shared responses during the subsequent class session (Brookfield, 2015). Phelan (2012) explains that "the practice of sharing students' anonymous responses" may help students sense the significance of a shared learning community" (p. 31). When students can hear others' thoughts and perceptions concerning course activities, it allows the students to feel more connected to their cohort members. This, in turn, allows students to feel more engaged (Phelan, 2012). It is especially important for pre-service teachers to be active participants in their learning; this practice serves as a model for how they might facilitate active engagement as future teachers.

Major themes that emerged in both the first and second CIQ included writing and literature circles. It is worth noting that at the beginning of this study, the participants (n=15) were asked if they liked to write; seven of the participants indicated that they liked to write, while two of the participants indicated that they did not like to write at all and six of the participants expressed that they "sometimes" liked to write. However, the participants of the study clearly indicated that one of the most engaging moments of the class was their writing time and discussing what they wrote. Although the concept of literature circles was a new instructional strategy to the pre-service teachers, their comments indicated that they were engaged during the learning process. The pre-service teachers indicated in their responses that the act of sharing ideas with their peers and receiving feedback while preparing for their literature circle was affirming and helpful.

There were some responses that answered multiple questions. For example, a student stated, "The most puzzling for me was the literature circles. I have never experienced one before. However, I am grateful for the video and [the instructor] for explaining it further" provided the answer for the following question: "What action that anyone took during class did you find most puzzling or confusing?", the student also indicated that the instructor was helpful, which could be included in the third question, "What action that anyone (teacher or student) took during class did you find most affirming or helpful?" Although the student did not specify that the instructor affirmed or was helpful, the student did state, "I am grateful for the video and [the instructor] for explaining it further" which in turn was interpreted as being affirming or helpful.

Limitations

There is evidence to support that the feedback professors gain from students can be both reliable and unreliable (Marsh, 1984). In order to minimize potential biases when providing feedback, Brookfield (1995) recommends that the Critical Incident Questionnaires (CIQ) are completed anonymously. It needs to be noted that in order to ensure student participation, points were connected to the completion of the CIQ, though points were not deducted if a pre-service teacher chose not to answer each question that was on the questionnaire or chose to submit the questionnaire without completion. This poses the question, "Do the results always capture an honest snapshot of the learning experience, and in the process promote participatory learning and feedback?" (p. 177). Having been both one of the researchers and the instructor in this study, it goes without saying that there is bias. Uijtdehaage and O'Neal (2015) suggests that evaluations can be completed "mindlessly, without careful considerations of whom they are evaluating and much less of how that faculty member performed" (p. 931). Equally notable, the CIQ could possibly have been perceived as a student evaluation and not that of a teaching tool. Regarding the amount of times the CIQ was administered, Brookfield explains he administers the CIQ at the end of class during the last class of the week (2015). In a traditional setting such as a 16-week semester, this time frame may be feasible; however, in a non-traditional setting when time is limited due to meeting only 8 times for a few hours each week, providing 20 minutes each week during class was not feasible in this environment.

Future Research

The researchers of this study recognize that educator preparation programs must continually work to ensure that pre-service teachers are receiving the most appropriate training. As the field of education continues to evolve, so must our methods and procedures. For this reason, we plan to add the CIQ to the reading courses taught for the traditional undergraduates in the education program of the University and complete a comparative study. In addition, we, as researchers, want to consider broad changes to all future reading classes to improve instruction for all students. It is vital that we look at

both traditional and non-traditional course offerings to determine best practices for varying student demographics.

Another component of the future research will be to refer to Fink's taxonomy and revise the course based on common themes identified in the CIQs, while also ensuring that those themes are within our realm to revise based on course objectives. Fink (2013) believes that we vastly improve the quality of higher education when we continue to find ways to create learning experiences that are mutually beneficial and significant for all involved. We want our research to influence continued professional growth for ourselves and others in the education community. More specifically, we believe that the CIQ can be an invaluable tool in assisting educators in reflecting on their instructional practices.

Conclusion

The focus of this study was on the instructor's teaching practices and how those practices impacted the levels of engagement and support perceived by each participant. The participants of this study were enrolled in a teacher educator preparation program; however, the results of this study have implications for all college instructors interested in how they may better engage their students. The Critical Incident Questionnaire (Brookfield, 1995) is one instrument that instructors may consider utilizing to detect levels of engagement and support as indicated by their students.

The results established that the CIQ was an effective measure to detect the instructor's impact in the classroom, and conducting this research allowed the course instructor to better understand the unique experiences of non-traditional students during their learning processes. The results also indicate that the participants in this study were able to gain valuable insights in relation to the course content, which in turn enhanced their overall learning experiences in the course. While some immediate changes seemed to improve course understanding and student engagement, more work is still needed, and future changes must be addressed.

The results of this research also illustrate the necessity of involving adult learners in their own learning and understanding of the content, especially when the content is as

complex as that of reading and language arts. Although there was a small sample in this study, the results allowed us to see how we can improve and adapt our own instruction to make greater impacts for our pre-service teachers and, ultimately, for their future students. Our goal as instructors of pre-service teachers should always be to find ways to best equip our newest educators. Darling-Hammond (1996) suggests that while pre-service teachers complete their programs, they should be a part of experiences where they are able to develop the necessary knowledge, practice and reflection to be an effective teacher.

The results of this study indicate how responses from Brookfield's CIQ (2015) may assist instructors in determining student engagement and impact of the instructor's teaching. When students are actively engaged within the classroom (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Russell, 2006), authentic learning takes place (McDonough, 2014). How we prepare pre-service teachers can have a tremendous impact on teacher retention and student learning in the P-12 environment, so it is paramount that we listen to the voices of our pre-service teachers as we involve them in their own learning.

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