

Quasi experimental study: Exploring the effectiveness of early field experiences on student teachers' attitudes towards teaching as a profession at Princess Nourha bint Abdulrahman University in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

Teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia recently required pre-service teachers to obtain early field experience, in which they observe various classes from different grade levels, participate in class activities, gain an understanding of school culture and policies, and ultimately confirm their decision to pursue teaching as a profession. This study investigated Saudi female pre-service teachers' opinions about teaching as a profession after experiencing eight weeks of early field experiences in public schools in Saudi Arabia. The study used a questionnaire administered to pre-service teachers before and after the field experience, and reflective essay writing about the eight weeks of classroom observations. Student teachers held positive opinions about the teaching profession, and early field experiences had no influence on their opinions about teaching as a profession. The reflective essays showed growing concerns about teachers' roles and responsibilities. All participants appreciated their experiences observing teaching and learning. They indicated their interest in and enthusiasm for becoming teachers.

Key words: School observation, early field experience, student teachers, cooperative teachers.]

1. Introduction

In 2010, Princess Nourha bint Abulrahman University initiated a new program that offers a bachelor degree in elementary education. The new program is supervised under the department of curriculum and teaching in the school of education at Princess Nourha bint Abdulrahman University in Saudi Arabia. The new program requires students to fulfill 50 hours of school observation prior to their teaching semester. These early field experiences provide student teachers with the opportunity to closely observe:

- actual school environment
- school policies
- different classroom management techniques
- implementation of different teaching methods
- students learning
- assessment and evaluation methods.

Prior to the first visit to the schools, student teachers spend four weeks learning about the techniques of observing. This is established through direct instructions about the theoretical concept of school observation and its benefits. Student teachers are introduced to the observational lenses

that help guide their observation. In their initial experience under the guidance of university supervisors, student teachers are placed in primary schools to observe at least three classes a week during the whole semester. During their visits, students are able to contact and communicate with the young learners, contact school personnel, and aid the cooperative teachers in instructional planning and evaluation, distributing papers, marking, facilitating group work, or designing teaching. Student teachers are expected to respect school policies regarding the schedule and dress code, and to present themselves in a professional manner. Each week student is asked to reflect on these experiences by focusing on each of the observational lenses. Student teachers' reflections include comments on classroom environment, students' engagement, students' characteristics, teaching methods, assessment methods, tasks and activities, and higher order thinking skills. The benefit of these early experiences is reciprocal: the school benefits from the collaboration by having student teachers working and cooperating enthusiastically with the school. The student teachers themselves benefit from the learning experiences that introduce them to the teaching profession (Shaw, 1988).

It has been argued that students planning to become teachers discover too late that teaching is not for them (Becket al., 2002). The reason for that is that they never had a chance to experience early during their professional development how it feels to be a teacher or to test themselves with children (Beck et al., 2002). College students interested in the teaching profession bring with them their beliefs, attitudes, ideals and expectations (Cole & Knowles, 1993). Student teachers, as Cole & Knowles (1993) explain, "often have firmly rooted images of themselves as teachers and high ideals and aspirations about teaching". Therefore, experiences of shock and disillusionment are created upon their first encounter with schools (1993). Hence, early field experiences help novice teachers understand themselves, become more self-aware, and familiarize themselves with classroom practices (Grijalva, 2008).

Early field experience becomes a learning tool that measures student teachers' understanding of the teaching and learning process (Shipp, 2013). It is well documented that early field experiences provided student teachers with an assimilation of what their life as a teacher would be like and helped to eliminate the conflict between expectations and realities that existed prior to their field experiences (Harty and Anderson, 1987; Knowles and Cole, 1993; Anderson et al., 2005; Fletcher and Luft, 2010; Cannon, 2014). The reason for that is:

"when pre-service teachers enter the "real world" of teaching, the second phase of the socialization process occurs; they suddenly become confronted with conflicting sets of attitudes, values, and ideologies embedded in the schools' subculture, role definitions and behavior expectations. Examining one's own beliefs, within the context of the classroom, is the essence of the reflective teacher who is able to reframe assumptions and evaluate belief structures." (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999; Hillocks, 1995; Sanchez and Nichols, 1995; Schon, 1983).

Lloyd (2005) explains:

"Because beliefs are ingrained from an early age, pre-service teachers must undergo focused training experiences in order to challenge their core beliefs effectively and offset their tendency to accept individualistic traditional experiences as truth."

In a longitudinal study by Fletcher and Luft (2010), the researchers explore student teacher beliefs about teaching and how their beliefs change accordingly throughout their professional development years. They explain:

"As the pre-service teachers engaged in the fieldwork associated with the program, their different experiences within each course impacted their beliefs in different ways. Noelle, for example, refined her beliefs toward more reform-based ideals during the teacher-student interactions course. For Noelle, this field experience really provided her with the opportunity to practice reform-based teaching. During this period of time, she was beginning to feel confident in using this approach but had concerns about her future responsibilities as a teacher."

Cannon and Scharmann (1996) found in a study conducted on the influence of placing student teachers in early experiences that observing cooperative teaching techniques in science classrooms improved their self-efficacy. Also, in the three-year study, the researchers found that early encounters with the school environment challenged student teachers' beliefs (2011). In one interview, the participant shows a shifted belief:

"What is your role as the science teacher?" In early interview, he answers "I am the guy who can lead you along the path to the answers" (Interview 3). When asked the same question a year later, he remarks, "My role is to structure the activity so that they will remember things later on, as well as be the expert who has been there. I am there to maintain order, discipline, and to do paperwork" (Interview 4).

In addition to being a learning tool, early field experience plays an important role in forming student teachers' professional identity (Chong et al., 2011). Substantial studies concluded that early field experiences influence the formation of student teachers' identity. Student teachers' identity influences their decision-making and their beliefs about their role in their society. Chong et al. wrote: "Being and becoming a teacher is a function of growth within complex social and cultural environments where discourses and identities are inconstant tension."

Most current studies on field experiences in the Arab world in general and in Saudi Arabia in particular focused on the last semester of students' practicum requirements. Little attention is given to the influence of early field experiences on student teachers' attitudes toward teaching as a profession. Most of this research focuses on student satisfaction with early field experiences. It is clear that what student teachers believe about teaching affects students' choices of instruction and decision-making, and that these early field experiences change beliefs student teachers hold prior to experiencing real classroom situations (Fletcher and Luft, 2010). Understanding the impact of early field experiences will contribute to understand the epistemological beliefs of future teachers, how they can be modified, and the factors that might change or influence these beliefs. Findings of some aspects of student teacher professional development will contribute to improving better teacher preparation programs.

2. Significance of the Study

Most of the research on student teachers' field experiences in Saudi Arabia has centered to a large degree on the student teachers' practicum during their last semester. The problem is that there is limited literature that reports on the influence of early field experiences on Saudi female student teachers' perception about teaching as a profession, as one aspect of teacher identity and professional development. The current study aims to find whether or not early school visits provoked higher positive perceptions about teaching as a profession after eight weeks of observing in schools. Presently, little conclusive evidence exists on the effect of early field experiences on student teachers' beliefs about teaching as a profession.

3. Research Questions

The present study investigates the following questions:

- What are the opinions of freshmen student teachers at Princess Nourha bint Abdulrahman University about teaching as a profession before experiencing eight weeks of school observation in primary schools?
- What are the opinions of freshmen student teachers at Princess Nourha bint Abdulrahman University about teaching as a profession after eight weeks of observation in primary schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia?
- Has the eight weeks of observing in schools had a significant effect on the student teachers' opinions about teaching as a profession?

4. Design

The current study used mixed design methods: a questionnaire and reflective essays. The questionnaire used in this study was adopted and translated from Shaukat (2004), who concluded that early field experiences positively influenced future teachers. The questionnaire was administered to the pre-service teachers before and after their field experiences. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic; the Arabic-translated version of this study was reviewed by two native speakers of the Arabic language who majored in English. The instrument was also reviewed by six faculty members at the school of education, for clarity and consistency of the items. The survey consists of two parts. Part one is the demographic information including parents' occupations, choice of major, satisfaction with the major, and the influence of choosing the major. Part two consists of 33 items; these items expressed opinions and beliefs about teaching. Also, at the end of the eight weeks of experiencing school settings, students were asked to write an essay reflecting on their experiences.

4.1 Reliability and Validity

To establish the validity of the study, the content of student teachers' opinions about teaching as a profession was driven by student teachers' professional development literature. Since the survey questionnaire of this study was adopted from the professional attitude survey by Shaukat (2004), this survey provided a valid and reliable instrument to measure target teachers' opinions about teaching before and after their early field experiences. For reliability, the instruments reported .769 Cronbach's alpha coefficient. Furthermore, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic; the Arabic-translated version of this study was reviewed by two native speakers of the Arabic language who majored in English. The instrument was also reviewed by six faculty members at the school of education, for clarity and consistency of the items. The survey consisted of two parts. Part one collected demographic information and part two consisted of the study questionnaire.

Table 1
Instrument Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.769	33

4.2 Participants and Setting

The participants were 42 first-year student teachers majoring in elementary education in the school of education at Princess Nourha bint Abdulrahman University. In Saudi Arabia, students majoring in elementary education are required to observe in schools for four consecutive semesters. The current participants were enrolled in the first semester of their schools observation course in spring 2013.

4.3 Data Analyses

The SPSS program was used to analyze the data. Descriptive analysis was used to determine the mean and the standard deviation of the opinion scale. To address the first research question, part one of the survey was developed. The scale consisted of 33 items presented in a Likert scale with five component options ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Individual items scores for the opinion scale ranged from 1 to 5. Mean scores within the range of 1 to 2.5 indicated negative opinions about teaching as a profession. Mean scores of 2.5 to 3.5 indicated neutral opinions about teaching as a profession. Mean scores within the range of 3.5 to 5 indicated positive opinions about

teaching as a profession. Furthermore, correlation analysis was used to identify if there was a relationship between participants' opinion about teaching as a profession before and after the eight weeks of observation and parent occupation, reasons for choosing teaching as a profession, influence on their choices, and their overall evaluation about their choice.

After the student teachers finished their eight weeks of observing, they were asked to write reflective essays. Students' reflective essays were analyzed using content analysis procedure. Frequencies and percentages were used to calculate most reported opinions regarding the teaching profession.

5. Results

This study investigates Saudi female student teachers' opinions about teaching as a profession after experiencing eight weeks of early field experiences observed in public schools in Saudi Arabia.

5.1 Part One: Demographic Findings

Findings of the participants' demographic factors are summarized in Tables 2–6.

Table 2

The distribution of the study samples according to the variable: Father's job

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Governmental employee	12	26.2
	Teacher	6	14.3
	Military	11	26.2
	Engineer	2	4.8
	Retired	2	4.8
	Businessman	4	9.5
	Diplomat	1	2.4
	Total	38	90.5
Missing	System	4	9.5
Total		42	100.0

Table 3

The distribution of the study samples according to the variable: Mother's job

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Teacher	10	23.8	25.0	25.0
	Housewife	28	66.7	70.0	95.0
	Government employee	1	2.4	2.5	97.5
	Deceased	1	2.4	2.5	100.0
	Total	40	95.2	100.0	
Missing	System	2	4.8		
Total		42	100.0		

Table 4

Students' responses to the question: Why did you decide to join this program?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Because it is only the program that is available for me.	7	16.7	16.7	16.7
Due to the influence of relatives/ friends/ parents/ others	2	4.8	4.8	21.4
Personal choice	18	42.9	42.9	64.3
No specific reason	8	19.0	19.0	83.3
Other reason	7	16.7	16.7	100.0
Total	42	100.0	100.0	

Table 5

Students' responses to the question: Who affected your decision to choose this specialization?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Parents	20	47.6	47.6	47.6
Friends	6	14.3	14.3	61.9
Relatives	2	4.8	4.8	66.7
Teachers	3	7.1	7.1	73.8
Other persons	11	26.2	26.2	100.0
Total	42	100.0	100.0	

Table 6

Students' responses to the question: What is the level of satisfaction from choosing teaching as a profession?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Highly acceptable	11	26.2	26.2	26.2
Acceptable	26	61.9	61.9	88.1
Unacceptable	2	4.8	4.8	92.9
Highly unacceptable	3	7.1	7.1	100.0
Total	42	100.0	100.0	

The results of the demographic factors showed that most of the respondents had government-employed fathers and housewife mothers. The results also showed that most of the respondents answered that parents and friends had influenced their choice of major. Lastly, most responded that teaching was their personal choice and they were happy with their choice.

5.2 Results of the Research Questions

- What are the opinions of freshmen student teachers at Princess Nourha bint Abdulrahman University about teaching as a profession before experiencing eight weeks of school observation in primary schools?
- What are the opinions of freshmen student teachers at Princess Nourha bint Abdulrahman University about teaching as a profession after eight weeks of observation in primary schools in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia?

- Has the eight weeks of observing in schools had a significant effect on the student teachers’ opinions about teaching as a profession?

5.2.1 Research question one.

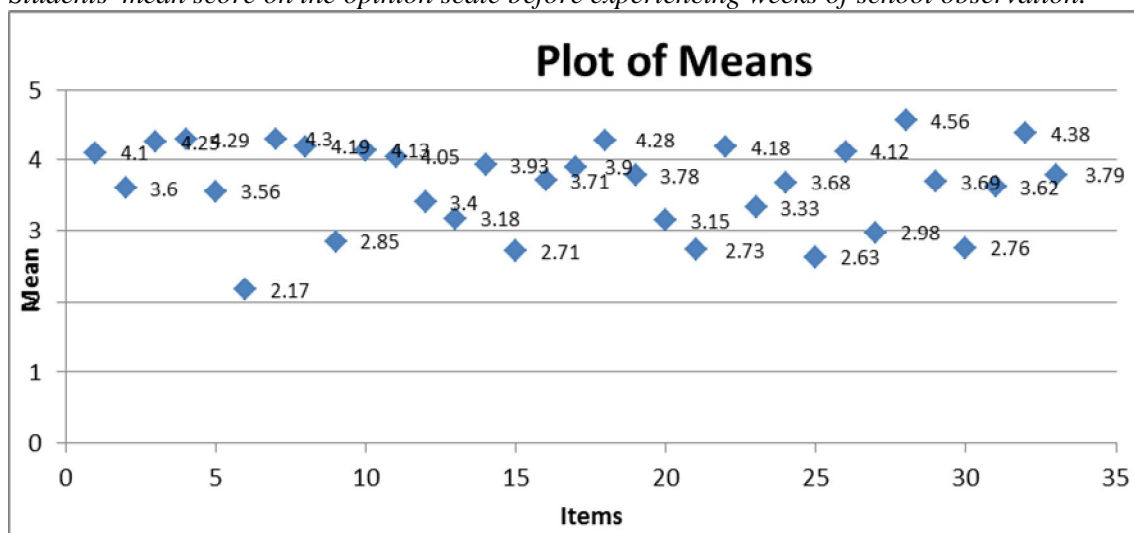
Data analysis revealed that the total mean score of student teachers’ opinion fell in the upper range of the opinion scale (M = 3.62, SD = 1.01). This indicates that student teachers at Princess Nourha bint Abdulrahman University held a positive opinion about teaching as a profession before experiencing eight weeks of observation in primary schools. The plot of means of the 33 statements, as shown in Figure 1, shows positive opinions about teaching as a profession. Most of the statements yielded more than 3 out of 5 mean scores.

The greatest influence on the opinion scale is shown by students’ responses to item 28 that states “Dealing with young learners requires lots of energy” (M = 4.56, SD = .63); 54.7% of those who responded to this item strongly agreed with this statement. The lowest mean score (2.17) was drawn from item 6, “Teaching isolates the persons from the rest of the World”. The next lowest mean was drawn from item 25 (2.63), “People teach only when they can find nothing else to do”.

Table 7
Descriptive statistics for the opinion scale

Dependent Variable	N	Mean	SD
Total	42	3.62	.34

Figure 1
Students’ mean score on the opinion scale before experiencing weeks of school observation.



5.2.2 Research questions two

Data analysis revealed that the total mean score of student teachers’ opinion fell in the upper range of the opinion scale (M = 3.55, SD = .46) in their second responses after eight weeks of experiences. This indicates that student teachers at Princess Nourha bint Abdulrahman University still hold a positive opinion about teaching as profession after experiencing eight weeks of observation in primary schools.

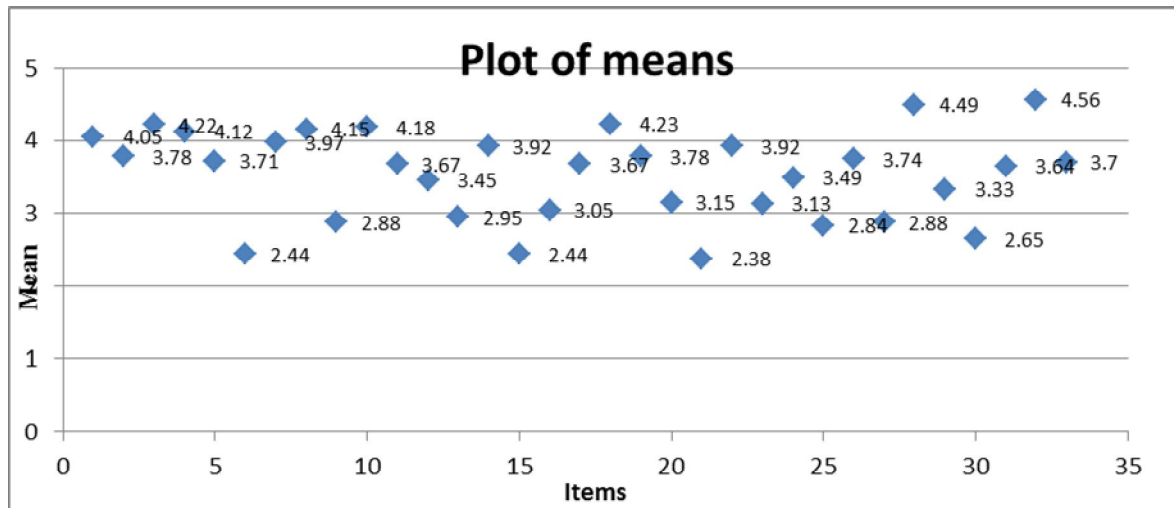
The greatest influence on the attitude scale is shown by students’ responses to item 32 that states “Teachers have powerful influence on students when all factors are considered” (M = 4.56, SD = .75); 64.29.7% of those who responded to this item strongly agreed with this statement. The

lowest mean score was drawn from item 21, “The teaching profession as a whole is untruthful and unreliable. The second lowest mean was drawn from item15, “Teaching should not be taken seriously”.

Table 8
Descriptive statistics for the opinion scale (After)

Dependent Variable	N	Mean	SD
Total	42	3.55	.46

Figure 2
Students' mean score on the opinion scale after experiencing weeks of school observation.



5.2.3 Research question three

The results do not reveal any significant effect on student teachers’ opinions about teaching as a profession after eight weeks of experiencing school settings and environments. This indicates that time spent in school had no significant effect on student teachers’ beliefs about teaching as a profession—even though the results show a decline in the mean scores before and after eight weeks of experiences in schools, which could be caused by changing certain beliefs after experiencing the realities of being a teacher.

Table 10
Result of the t-Test

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Sig (2-tailed)
Before	42	3.62	.345	.457
After	42	3.55	.463	

5.3 Results from the Reflective Essays

Student teachers were asked to respond in an essay reflecting on the experiences they had with cooperative teachers, students, principals, school environments, and other aspects of teaching and learning. The purpose of the essay was to capture student teachers’ perspectives on the effects of early field experience. These responses were categorized into themes for analysis. The content analysis procedure was employed to code the frequencies of the responses. Three themes emerged from these essays:

1. teacher responsibilities and role
2. the realities of teaching in a primary classroom
3. the differences between prior expectations and what student teachers felt after the eight weeks of experience.

All of the 42 student teachers responded to the question that asked about their experiences (the essay was one of the assessment tasks students had to submit at the end of the semester). All student teachers agreed that teachers hold huge responsibilities not only for students' learning but for nurturing and caring for young learners. The second category is connected to the realities of teaching and learning. Most students pointed out that what they learned in teacher preparation courses regarding what ought to be taught, how classes can be organized, which method of teaching they should use, and the assessment they should use might not be applicable in most Saudi primary classrooms. Student teachers reported that school support, facilities available, students' level, and number of students inside the class room contributed to these reflections. Below are some sample statements from students' responses from each category:

Category 1:

- "Teachers are like mothers to these young learners."
- "Teaching is not as easy as I was thinking."
- "I love children; that is why I wanted to become a teacher."

Category 2:

- "Teaching is not only playing with children."
- "It is hard to deal with children."
- "I will not be able to reach my lesson objectives easily with so much distraction in the classroom."

Category 3:

- "Teaching is not as I was expecting."
- "Teaching is very demanding work."
- "I became hesitant of my choice to become a teacher."

6. Discussion

The study contains three questions of interest relating to student teachers' opinions about teaching as a profession before and after eight weeks of early encounters of primary school experiences. This study revealed encouraging results. Student teachers hold positive opinions about the teaching profession. This result is consistent with studies that investigated student teachers' beliefs about teaching. Student teachers enter the teaching profession with beliefs and images of good teaching and images of themselves as teachers (Chong et al., 2005). Many studies noted that prospective teachers hold simplistic views about the teaching profession prior to their initial training (Whitbeck, 2000; Richards and Killen, 1994; Pajares, 1992; Feiman-Nemser et al., 1998). Student teachers enter the teaching profession with limited and unrealistic expectations, high confidence and images formed from their past experiences, which could explain this result (Wilk, 2004). Having positive opinions about teaching in the first semester of their training program is explained by their initial expectation of what it takes to be a teacher. Furthermore, the analysis of student teachers' demographic factors revealed that almost all of the participants indicated that the teaching profession was their own choice. This means that choosing the teaching profession was not a backup career choice. Wang and Fwu (2002) explained that student teachers' positive opinions about teaching could be explained by the fact that the students were inexperienced and hold naive views about teaching before entering the real world of classrooms. Hence, follow-up research on the same group is suggested to determine whether there is a change of opinion.

It is also worth noting that the positive view about the teaching profession could be rooted in the cultural and social views about teaching (Wang and Fwu, 2002). In Saudi Arabia, teaching is considered to be the highest rank of nobility, since a person is responsible for educating their people. Prophet Mohammad is considered the first teacher for Muslims around the world.

Although the results post their experiences revealed a decline in mean score of the opinion scale, student teachers' opinions about the teaching profession are still within the positive range. This could be due to the fact that student teachers' prior beliefs about teaching are stable—that is, rooted in social and cultural views about the teaching profession. The minor decline of opinion after their experiences might be explained by the fact that students with enthusiasm for, and love of, becoming an elementary teacher face a realization that teaching young learners hold more responsibilities than what they thought (Chong et al., 2011).

The study results also revealed no significant difference of opinions between both periods. That indicates that early field experience was not enough to change their opinion about teaching as a profession. This could be explained by the fact that, during the eight weeks, student teachers were asked only to observe the school environment, including teaching, assessment, contacting and communicating with the young learners, contacting school personnel, and aiding the cooperative teachers in instructional planning and evaluation, distributing papers, marking, facilitating group work, or designing teaching aids. But they were not part of the actual teaching process. Concerns about content knowledge, cognitive or pedagogical, were not part of the requirements (Chonget al., 2005). As student teachers progress in their training program, they become more involved in the teaching process. Almost all of the participants reported concerns regarding the responsibilities that come with teaching young learners.

7. Recommendations and Implications

This study contributes to knowledge about teacher preparation programs at Princess Nourha bint Abdulrahman University through understanding student teachers' opinions about the teaching profession. Early field experiences provide student teachers with the opportunity to examine themselves as teachers in real school communities. Recommendations arising from this study follow.

1. Usually a student teacher's perception of teaching is affected by that student's culture, environment and prior experiences with schools. Research studies investigating these factors are recommended.
2. In order to understand how early field experiences could be helpful to cultivate student teachers' beliefs about teaching, it is recommended that the requirements of the field experience be re-evaluated.
3. Teachers' beliefs, experiences, attitudes, knowledge and values are factors that are relevant to their teaching practice and will influence their professional development in teaching. Further research using the sample from this study is recommended in order to follow up on their professional development.

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