



Research in Social Sciences and Technology

VIRTUALLY READY? PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF A VIRTUAL INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of six secondary pre-service teachers that completed a semester long internship with a supervising mentor at a virtual school in the Southeastern United States. The secondary pre-service teachers in this study voluntarily chose a placement in the virtual school over a traditional classroom placement for completion of their initial licensure field experience. This study sought to examine why secondary pre-service teachers chose a virtual internship and what their experiences were like as online instructors. A total of six participants completed a sixty-minute semi-structured interview at the completion of the semester long virtual school internship. Results of the study indicated that secondary pre-service teachers' primary motivation for entering a virtual internship experience was "convenience." Additionally, participants felt prepared for future employment in virtual schools, but had some reservations about their prospects in a traditional classroom setting.

Keywords: Virtual schools, qualitative, pre-service teachers, teacher education, technology.

Introduction

Online learning is one of the most debated and controversial topics at all levels of education in today's society. From graduate programs at universities to elementary schools, the presence of online instruction has continued to grow over the last decade both in the United States and abroad. In fact, as of 2011, online courses represented 31.3% of total enrollments for colleges and universities in the U.S.; while every state in the U.S. also offered some type of online learning option to K-12 students (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Watson et al. 2011). For teacher educators, this growth simply cannot be ignored and a more direct effort needs to be made in order to ensure that future teachers are being prepared to reach students in both traditional and online settings. Unfortunately, "very few teacher education programs in the United States offer a curriculum for online teaching, leaving districts, states, and virtual schools to train online teachers" (Dawley, Rice, & Hinks, 2010, p. 11). The lack of attention

paid to online teaching in teacher education programs could be attributed to a myriad of factors, including issues of equity, accessibility, and lack of familiarity or comfort with technology by teacher educators. However, regardless of how teacher educators feel about online instruction, the fact is that public schools are increasingly turning to this platform as a way to improve learning experiences for students.

Researchers in the U.S. and abroad continue to express the need for additional training of teachers in the realm of online instruction. Yet, despite the increasing presence of online instruction in public schools and universities, less than 2% of teacher education programs in the U.S. offer some type of field experience for pre-service teachers in K-12 online programs (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). The shortage of learning opportunities in the realm of online instruction in many teacher education programs continues to be extremely problematic, considering how many K-12 public schools now look to include this form of instruction in the curriculum. For this reason, the researchers in this study sought to examine how secondary pre-service teachers at a large research university experienced a virtual internship as part of their initial licensure program.

This study shares the experiences of six secondary pre-service teachers located at a large research university located in the Southeastern United States. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to better understand the internship experience at a K-12 virtual school, with the goal of adding to the literature on improving teacher education programs for the unique task of online teaching. The researchers in this study hoped to gain valuable insights from secondary pre-service teachers regarding why they chose to participate in a virtual internship, as well as how they experienced this unique training program. To begin answering this initial line of inquiry, the researchers were guided by the following two research questions:

(1) Why do secondary pre-service teachers choose to participate in a virtual internship experience over a traditional internship experience at a brick and mortar school?

(2) How do secondary pre-service teachers experience a practicum placement at a virtual school?

Review of Literature

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2002), virtual education, distance education, and E-Schools refer to “instruction in a learning environment where teacher and student are separated by time, space, or both, and the teacher provides course content through course management applications, multimedia resources, the Internet, videoconferencing, etc. Students receive the content and communicate with the teacher via the same technologies” (United States Department of Education, 2002, p. 11). This broad definition of virtual education is provided to highlight the plethora of ways through which contemporary students are experiencing “classroom” instruction. While some people may regard online classes as primarily a post-secondary phenomenon, readers may be surprised to know that online and blended learning courses are actually increasingly present throughout K-12 schools. In fact, according to Picciano and Seaman (2009), more than 1,030,000 students in elementary school, middle school, and high school are attending virtual schools across the United States. As more students and schools turn to online learning, it becomes exceedingly important for teacher educators, administrators and education stakeholders to consider how teachers are being prepared to effectively deliver instruction in the virtual environment. Dessoiff (2009) stated, “The growing use of online teaching in the nation’s public schools has placed a related burden on district administrators to ensure that they use high quality and highly qualified instructors” (p. 23). While most states require teachers to have current state licenses or certifications, few provide guidance or regulations for training, certification, or professional development associated with virtual schools. Therefore, researchers need to examine what makes an

effective online instructor and find ways to improve the quality and value of virtual classrooms.

Hemschik (2009) conducted a case study exploring how K-8 online educators adapted to working in virtual school settings. The study revealed eight themes: (1) pedagogical beliefs, (2) educator practice, (3) curriculum, (4) employee-based research strategies, (5) development of the learning community, (6) human systems, (7) technology systems, and (8) organizational systems. Hemschik found that the “development of appropriate skills in online communication, online reading, computer-based note taking, and organization will unquestionably help students and teachers become more successful as they both may be limited in their experiences with online learning” (p. 49). Hemschik’s study highlights the importance of training teachers to be successful in addressing the unique challenges associated with online and blended learning classrooms. While this training can be accomplished in many ways, it is logical to start this training in the early stages of pre-service teachers and continuing into the all-important internship experience.

Research over the years has shown that the internship experience is one of the most meaningful and impactful events in preparing a pre-service student teacher for the realities of the classroom (Davis & Roblyer, 2005). Until recently, this internship experience consisted of pre-service teachers working in a traditional “brick and mortar” classroom with supervising teachers. However, as technology advances continue to change the face of education in the 21st century, pre-service teachers are now experiencing the opportunity to conduct their internships online at virtual schools. This unique learning environment requires a new set of skills for teachers to be considered “highly qualified.” The No Child Left Behind Act defines a highly qualified teacher as one who is fully certified, has a bachelor’s degree, and demonstrates competence in subject knowledge and teaching in core subjects (United States Department of Education, 2002). While this makes the teacher qualified, according to NCLB

legislation, it may not encompass the additional skills needed to be a successful online educator in the high school classroom. Teacher preparation programs are particularly crucial in preparing “highly qualified” teachers and often re-shape or re-design programs to meet the changing needs of public schools. Dessoff (2009) conducted a study interviewing school administrators about online education and found a strong consensus that extended training and skills are required to be an effective online instructor. Additionally, the administrators in this study identified strong written and oral skills, ability to motivate, and comfort-utilizing technology as key traits needed by teachers to be successful in the online classroom environment (Dessoff, 2009).

To better understand the experiences of a virtual internship, the researchers in this study interviewed six secondary pre-service teachers that chose to participate in a virtual internship placement over a traditional internship. All participants were recruited via email and interview requests were made following the completion of their internship experience in an attempt to minimize the potential conflicts associated with possibly critiquing a program while still being enrolled in it. Additional methods for the study are described in the following section.

Methods

This phenomenological study focused on the experiences of six secondary pre-service teachers in an attempt to understand the essence of their virtual internship experience. According to Merriam (1998), “these essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experience of different people is bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essence of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 1998, p. 15). Phenomenology was chosen as a theoretical framework because it allows the participants the opportunity to describe their lived experiences in a narrative context based on their realities and feelings within the experience. Thus, phenomenology suited this study well

because it focuses on acquiring an understanding of a phenomenon based exclusively on the participant's experiences and how the participants made meaning from these experiences. Participants for this study were selected using criterion sampling (Patton, 2002), with each participant choosing to forego a semester long traditional internship placement in a brick and mortar classroom setting for the semester long virtual internship. The virtual internship experience was created as a partnership between the university and the participating virtual school. Each student participating in the virtual internship was partnered with a mentor teacher that worked for the virtual school for a minimum of three years. Administrators from the virtual school selected teachers that they considered to be "high quality" to serve as mentors to the university students. Additionally, each student participating in the virtual internship was assigned a university supervisor to monitor their progress and make sure they were completing their responsibilities up to the standards expected of the profession. The virtual internship experience lasted a total of one semester, beginning in January and ending in June, with each participant working in partnership with his or her mentors to gradually assume the instructional responsibilities of the online course. As the curriculum and assessments were already designed at the virtual school, the participating interns were not required or expect to plan in any of these instructional areas. Rather, the majority of their responsibilities focused on maintaining communication (telephone calls, emails, online chats, etc.) with all students to monitor their individual progress and assist them as needed. Each class at the virtual school contained roughly 25-35 students. All participating interns in this study worked closely with their mentors to develop strategies and procedures for helping each individual student complete the virtual course.

After self-enrolling in the virtual internship, the students were recruited for participation in this research study. The researchers conducted 60-minute semi-structured interviews with each of the participants. Open-ended questions were utilized to allow

participants to provide a rich description of their experience during the virtual internship and better understand the essence of the phenomenon. Interviews were also used as a method to collect data because they allow researchers insight into participants “interpretations, perceptions, and meanings and understandings, as the primary data sources” (Mason, 2002, p. 56). In the end, all six of the students opting to complete the virtual internship experience agreed to be interviewed for this study at the end of their program.

Participants in this study were asked to self-identify and provide demographic information. There were four males and two females, with one female identifying as Hispanic and one male identifying as Asian. All other participants’ self-identified as Caucasian. This study took place in a large research-intensive university located in the southeastern United States. Additionally, the state where this university was located also has a large statewide virtual school, which partnered with the teacher preparation program to make this internship experience possible. Participants in this study completed all of the same coursework and licensure requirements as other students in the secondary teacher education program.

The interviews took place at the university where the participants attended school in the month following the participants’ completion of the internship experience. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed, bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify underlying themes in the essence of the virtual internship experience. Themes were then shared with each participant to ensure that the researchers accurately captured the voice and lived experiences of the participants. All names throughout the study are pseudonyms utilized to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine why secondary pre-service teachers engaged in a virtual internship over a traditional internship and how they experienced this unique phenomenon. Findings revealed two shared horizons for the first research question

regarding why participants choose to enroll in a virtual internship and two shared horizons for the second research question looking into how participants experienced a practicum placement at a virtual school. These shared horizons make up the essence of the virtual internship experience for participants in this study and findings are discussed in the following section based on the shared horizons for each research question.

Research Question 1: Why do secondary pre-service teachers choose to participate in a virtual internship experience over a traditional internship experience at a brick and mortar school?

The initial research question posed in this study was designed to try and understand the rationale and reasoning of each participant about why they chose to enroll in a virtual internship experience. The participants had a variety of reasons and they all spent a good deal of time reflecting and discussing this question during the interview process. After transcribing and coding all of the interview data, the researchers identified two shared horizons, (1) Convenience, (2) New Experiences. Each of these shared horizons will be discussed separately in the sections that follow.

Convenience

One of the first themes to emerge from the data regarding why participants chose to enroll in a virtual internship was the idea of “convenience.” Each participant discussed various aspects of their lives and how busy their schedules are due to work, family obligations, and a variety of other responsibilities. It appears that the participants in this study were under the impression that the virtual internship might offer them more flexibility in their schedule or free time to accomplish other things. As one respondent commented:

Honestly, I originally was drawn to the virtual internship because I work a lot and I thought the flexibility of the schedule might make it, like, easier for me to work during the

school year. My parents don't really help me with bills or anything so I kind of have to think about how I'll be able to complete the program and still pay my rent. (interview with Taylor)

While financial considerations are nothing new for pre-service teachers (or college students in general), Taylor's comment brings forward some interesting considerations for teacher educators and the institutions preparing them to enter the classroom. How can teacher education programs expect to attract the "best and brightest" students into the field with a program structure that not only offers little to no financial support, but actually makes it exceedingly difficult for students to provide for themselves during the process? The full time internship structure, while undoubtedly beneficial in teacher development, may encourage pre-service teachers to take out student loans for needed funding, which in turn increases the financial burden placed on students once they enter the teaching field and could lead to the high attrition rate among teachers within the first five years of their careers.

Another consideration along the lines of "convenience" came in relation to family responsibilities. Often times, pre-service teachers have families of their own, so dedicating several months to an unpaid internship experience can be quite a burden, and even deterrent, for people wishing to become teachers. This was a sentiment shared in one of the interviews with Marcie when she stated:

Well, I have two young kids, so I entered the teacher education program worried about the internship semester and how I would deal with being away from them. Then when we were presented with the virtual internship option, I just thought it might be a lot easier for me and my family if I wasn't tied to a school building Monday-Friday from 8-4 or whatever. (interview with Marcie)

While pre-service teachers come into teacher education programs with a variety of family, financial, and other considerations, it remains nevertheless important for teacher education programs to consciously acknowledge these challenges and put support systems in

place that can help each student be successful. Additionally, larger teacher education programs, such as the one involved in this study, often partner with many local school districts in order to find placements for all of their interns. Large distances can separate school districts, which places additional transportation burdens on students, especially those lacking reliable transportation. This scenario can be quite common among college students and further highlights the convenience of a virtual internship, as stated in one of the interviews by Van:

I think the first reason I was drawn to the virtual internship experience is because I don't have a car, so obviously transportation is a big issue for me. I guess I could take public transportation, but not really knowing what school we would be placed at (in the traditional internship) sort of freaked me out a little bit. (interview with Van)

Convenience, while sometimes carrying a negative connotation among researchers, can be a highly motivating factor. During the interview process, the participants did not highlight the convenience factor as a way to "get out of extra work," nor did we get the impression that the participants were lazy in any way. On the contrary, the participants were all hard working individuals that saw the convenience of the virtual internship as a pragmatic opportunity to realize their goals of becoming a teacher within the complex reality of their daily lives. The virtual internship, or some type of blended learning experience, could prove to be an enticing alternative for students with financial struggles, families, and/or jobs, wishing to enter into the field of education.

New Experiences

Another highly motivating factor shared by the participants in this study for selecting the virtual internship was the opportunity to have a new experience. As the program in this study was one of the first and only teacher education programs in the U.S. to offer a completely online internship that lead to initial teacher certification, many participants in this

study saw the virtual internship as a new and exciting opportunity that would allow them to be on the forefront of technology and education. As Zach indicated:

For me, one of the really cool things about this program (the virtual internship) is that it is so new and kind of cutting edge. I have always liked technology and I was excited about the idea of being one of the first students in the country to participate in a virtual internship. (interview with Zach)

Furthermore, participants in this study went on to highlight how the virtual internship differed from a traditional classroom internship, and many saw this as a positive deviation. The participants discussed some of the well-documented difficulties of teaching in contemporary classrooms, such as the influence of high stakes testing, teacher evaluation models, violence in the schools, etc. Although virtual schools certainly deal with similar issues, the participants seemed more open to overcoming these obstacles because of the unique experience a virtual internship might offer. These sentiments were highlighted in an interview with Fallon when she stated:

Let's see. Well, I guess I first started thinking about doing the internship at the virtual school after talking to a friend of mine that was in the middle of their internship experience at a local high school. She was kind of going on and on about all the issues with students not paying attention in class, parents freaking out about their kids grades and college, and all of the other stuff that goes along with teaching. It all sounded a little depressing to be honest and after hearing about the virtual internship opportunity, there just seemed to be so much excitement and optimism about the program and how it could be the future of education. I guess I kind of felt rejuvenated about having an experience that not many teachers have had and maybe that will give me a leg up in a highly competitive job market. (interview with Fallon)

The theme of new experiences was further reinforced by participants that had family or friends actively involved in the field of education. Several participants chose to focus on the “uniqueness” of the virtual internship as a motivating factor for choosing it over the traditional classroom placement. These feelings were often solidified by friends or family members that were educators, encouraging the participants to take advantage of the virtual internship as a way to learn more about the expanding sector of online education courses. As one participant responded:

My mom has been a middle school teacher for almost 30 years or so, so I have been around the “insiders” (air quotes in interview) of education for a while. I remember a lot of dinner conversations centered around what happened in my mom’s class at school that day, sometimes it was good stuff, sometimes it was not so good stuff. Naturally, when the option for this program (virtual internship) became available to me, I discussed it with my mom. She really encouraged me to enroll in the program and talked about the growing importance of online classes. She talked about how her kids actually had to complete a course online (state required) and told me I should get some experience in this growing field of education. So I suppose I enrolled to get a new experience. Thanks mom! (interview with Alex).

Overall, participants in this study appeared to choose the virtual internship experience because of convenience and the new experience it offered. Several factors highlighted in the aforementioned sections offer valuable insights into the appeal of virtual internships, and how this experience might evolve the field of teacher preparation. As online education becomes more prevalent in the years ahead, and perhaps virtual internship opportunities expand, it will be interesting to see if the “uniqueness” of this form of training persists and continues to be a pulling factor.

Research Question 2: How do secondary pre-service teachers experience a practicum placement at a virtual school?

This section will highlight findings from the second research question regarding how secondary pre-service teachers experience a practicum placement at a virtual school. The majority of the interview questions focused on various aspects and components of the virtual internship experience so that the researchers might better understand the dynamics of this learning opportunity. Several open-ended questions were asked to elicit responses and many questions were probed throughout the interview to gain deeper insight and understanding into the phenomenon. After transcribing and coding all of the interview data, the researchers identified two shared horizons that made up the essence of the virtual school practicum experience, (1) importance of communication and (2) time management. Each of these shared horizons will be discussed separately in the sections that follow.

Importance of Communication

Communication is a key component of being an effective classroom teacher. Communication was a trait highlighted consistently by participants involved in the virtual internship experience, but in a variety of different ways. Participants discussed the importance of and struggles with the different platforms utilized to communicate effectively in virtual schools with students, parents, administrators, mentors, and university supervisors. While good communication skills are certainly a staple of good teachers, whether in a traditional or virtual classroom, it may be even more important to focus on the diversity of these skills with virtual classroom teachers. Participants in this study often discussed the difficulties of developing rapport with their students in online courses. As one participant discussed:

Getting to know all of my students at the beginning of the semester was really interesting. Just like a traditional classroom, they were all so different and needed different things from me as their teacher. Some kids wanted to talk a lot, and others hated it. I remember one student in particular that would write these really thoughtful and detailed responses via email or discussion boards, but when I called him he was so quiet and shy.

When I asked if everything was okay, he said, “I just hate talking on the phone.” After that, I kind of started re-evaluating the needs of the students and considering my role as a facilitator of their learning. Just like any good teacher, I had to find the best ways to reach them and how to make them comfortable so they would feel open enough to talk with me about class assignments and all that stuff. (interview with Zach).

Getting to know the students was just the beginning of the communication process for participants in this study. Additional communication issues arose throughout the virtual internship process surrounding student feedback and the most efficient and effective ways to provide feedback to each individual student. As teachers in virtual schools are required to maintain and document consistent communication with each student enrolled in their courses (sometimes 40 plus students), it became increasingly important for the participants in the study to really develop good oral and written communication skills and deliver feedback in a timely fashion. The complexity of the communication spectrum was highlight by Taylor, who stated:

Providing feedback to students in an online class is pretty difficult and really time consuming. Sometimes, feedback is given via email, sometimes over the phone or video conferencing. Hell, sometimes it is even via text messages. All of these different methods of communication have advantages and disadvantages, but I guess one of my biggest takeaways from the program is how important it is to be actively in communication with your students. The kids mostly seemed like they wanted to feel a connection to a “real” teacher. It was really challenging for me to balance my work and personal life with all of the constant communication needs of my students. It was not at all what I was expecting going into this experience, but I think I will be a better teacher and communicator because of my time in the virtual internship. (interview with Taylor)

As Taylor indicated in the previous quote, communication can be a substantial obstacle on the path to becoming an effective teacher in online courses. In addition to the importance of communication with students, the participants in this study also referenced the importance of good communication between virtual school mentors and university supervisors. As these are the people most directly involved in the participant's successful completion of the virtual internship, it stands to reason a good level of communication is needed to help pre-service teachers feel supported. Good communication between mentors and pre-service teachers has proven to be a contributing factor to the successful completion of an internship experience (Compton & Davis, 2010; Duncan & Barnett, 2009). One participant spoke specifically about an example of miscommunication and how it leads to feelings of anxiety.

So my first week or so in the internship, I was talking with my mentor on the phone about the course curriculum, assessments, and all sorts of technical things. I noticed after a while she started to sound, like, frustrated maybe. It was like she expected me to know some of this stuff and I felt like maybe she didn't really want to work with me. I talked to my university supervisor about it, and he recommended that I talk with my mentor teacher directly about my concerns, which I did. It turns out, my mentor was just having a bad day and had some personal issues she was dealing with, so it wasn't really me at all. After going through all that, I realized how important good communication is, especially when talking over the phone, because people can't necessarily see you to know your mood and all that. (interview with Marcie)

Time Management

The internship experience, both traditional and virtual, can be extremely difficult and time consuming for pre-service teachers (Ballantyne & Hansford, 1995; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). Students involved in a practicum experience have teaching

responsibilities, university responsibilities, coursework, life, etc. Considering all the factors involved, it is no wonder why time management was a shared horizon for participants in this study. The virtual internship required a great deal of organization and sometimes-tedious attention to details. As mentioned in the previous section, participants in this study had to keep detailed communication logs documenting when and how they communicated with every student enrolled in the course. The communication logs were discussed by all of the participants in the study, and not necessarily in favorable terms. Clearly, there was a struggle to complete the communication log tasks along with all of the various other responsibilities associated with teaching in a virtual school. To that end, the importance of good time management was continually a part of the discussion revolving around the development of good teaching in an online classroom environment. One participant highlighted these frustrations with the following comment:

Just like any new training experience I guess, it took me a few weeks to really figure out all of the different aspects of this job (teaching at a virtual school). I mean, there are just so many little things that you have to keep up with all the time, like communication logs (documenting when/how contact is made with each student in the course) which was such a pain in the ass to me. I get why it is necessary because you have to actually show that you are helping every student, but it just took so much time. (interview with Van)

Additionally, some participants noted their misperception of the work schedule associated with the virtual internship. Participants mentioned how they entered the virtual internship thinking that they may have more flexibility and “free time” during the weekdays, but found that desire unfulfilled throughout the process.

I think one of the most challenging things for me during the internship process was time management. I thought there would be more flexibility in my schedule throughout the semester, but boy was I wrong. Students enrolled in online courses work at all different paces

and times throughout the course, so I was basically on call from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. every night. But after a couple of weeks, I found myself kind of obsessively checking my email, phone, everything to see what was going on with my students and address their questions. It was exhausting and a lot more work than I thought it would be at the beginning of the year. (interview with Alex)

Undoubtedly, school and university mentors need to play an active role in helping pre-service teachers develop good time management skills. As the virtual school environment is quite unique and offers a wide range of time constraints, the cooperating teacher will need to help the pre-service teachers develop appropriate strategies to manage their responsibilities in ways that effectively maximize their time. Since teaching in a fully online classroom will be a completely new experience for pre-service teachers, mentors should likely focus on time management and structure in the early stages of the internship.

I worked with my mentor a lot to try and set up a schedule for myself during the week. She (the mentor) put a lot of emphasis on this in the early stages of the internship because she always would be talking about how important structure and time management is for online teachers. We worked together really well and she helped me figure out the best ways to organize my time so I could be a good teacher, but not kill myself in the process. (interview with Fallon)

Limitations of Study

As this was a phenomenological qualitative research study, it would be irresponsible not to highlight limitations of the study. In qualitative research, the researcher often acts as the mechanism for data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data (Hatch, 2002; Glesne, 2011). Being intricately involved with all steps of the data throughout the study could cause issues of validity, as the researchers develop the role of participator (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). However, the researchers in this study had no vested interest in the success or failure

of the virtual internship program at the university, nor did we have any prior relationship with the participants in the study. The researchers interest in this study stems from our experiences taking online classes as graduate students, and our subsequent roles as teacher educators looking to improve our own respective programs. We attempted to minimize our bias in the data analysis process by sharing our interpretations with the interview participants to make sure we adequately and accurately captured the essence of their experience in the virtual school practicum.

Additionally, the findings from this study cannot be exaggerated or generalized to any other virtual internship programs. Each setting and program will likely have unique features in place that make the virtual internship slightly different, which could alter the findings if the study was conducted at another location with new participants. This study was also conducted at a large research-intensive university in the southeastern region of the United States, meaning the essence of the phenomenon could be different if the study were replicated at a different city, state, or country. Finally, this study was limited by the fact that we only conducted one interview with each of the participants. We could have developed additional rapport with the participants by conducting multiple interviews in an effort to learn even more details about the virtual internship experience. It would be interesting in the future to conduct interviews at the beginning and end of the virtual internship experience and see if there are any changes in the participants feelings. It also would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study that followed pre-service teachers into their careers and have them reflect back on the virtual internship experience.

Conclusions

The findings in this study have implications for educators and teacher preparation programs. Firstly, participants in this study had favorable experiences with the virtual internship and each of them saw value in this new experience. While it may not be possible

for all teacher preparation programs to partner with virtual schools to create a similar internship experience, virtual internships should at least become a part of the conversation regarding the future of teacher education. As online courses continue to proliferate in both public schools and universities, more consideration should be given to the preparation of quality teachers in this environment.

Online learning continues to be a global phenomenon in a variety of fields, but especially in education. Schools all across the U.S. consistently rely on online course to supplement or enrich their curriculum, empowering students to stretch their learning beyond the four walls of traditional classrooms. Yet, despite this growing popularity and importance, teacher preparation programs consistently disregard training in the realm of online instruction. In fact, the International Association for K12 Online Learning reported:

A national survey of teacher education programs conducted in 2012 found that a paltry 1.3% of them were preparing their teachers for next generation learning models. That survey and subsequent studies have identified the need for a dramatic shift in the skills and methods for education preparation toward next generation learning models, which require many of the same skills as traditional education, yet a more comprehensive set of skills to navigate a diverse range of learning environments—including blended, online, competency-based models emerging in anytime, everywhere traditional classrooms and schools (iNACOL, 2013, p. 4).

Often times, education is a field that remains reactive instead of proactive. Technological advances have changed the way that society operates, yet, somewhat strangely, most teacher preparation programs continue to exist in the same fashion that they did 30 years ago. This study highlights the value of a virtual internship experience as at least a component of teacher preparation programs. Just like teacher education programs highlight differences in working in rural, suburban, and urban settings, so too should the online setting be included in

this dialogue. Without including specific training in virtual schools, teacher education programs are limiting pre-service teachers job prospects and placing the burden of preparing high quality virtual school teachers on local school districts or state level virtual schools. As the enrollments of K-12 virtual schools continues to increase throughout the U.S., teacher education programs can no longer passively sit to the side and hope that online learning is a passing trend. Virtual schools are here to stay, so the time is now for teacher education programs to begin actively considering ways to prepare future teachers for high quality instruction in online classrooms.

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Appendix A

Virtual Internship Study Interview Protocol

1. Tell me a little bit about your educational background and why you want to become a teacher?
2. As a pre-service teacher, how important do you think the internship experience is for your development as a future teacher? Why/Explain?
3. What made you decide or influenced you to complete your internship at a virtual school?
4. Thinking about your virtual internship, what would you say are some of the strengths of this experience?
 - o What are some of the weaknesses of this experience?
5. How do you think this virtual internship compares to a traditional classroom (face-to-face) internship in terms of preparing you to become a future teacher?
 - o Do you feel you are missing out on anything by doing your internship virtually?
 - o Do you feel more prepared for certain aspects of teaching that are more commonly found in virtual classrooms (use of technology, written communication) because of your virtual experience?
 - o Do you feel less prepared for certain aspects of teaching that are not commonly experienced in the same way for online classes (classroom management, student engagement, etc..) as they are for traditional face-to-face classes?
6. As an educator, what do you think are some of the strengths and weaknesses of online learning?
 - o As a teacher, how do you take advantage of these strengths and improve the weaknesses to maximize student learning?
7. How was the feedback from your virtual internship experience from your supervising teacher and supervising faculty member? Do you think evaluation of your performance was fair? Discuss and explain.
8. Do you feel that a virtual internship is something that should be mandatory component for all students in a teacher preparation program? Why or Why not?
9. What recommendations would you make to teacher educators to improve the overall quality of virtual internships? Would you recommend this experience to other students?
10. Is there any other information or comments regarding your experiences with a virtual internship or this interview that you think would be useful for me to know?