

Strategies for Successful Early Field Experiences in a Teacher Education Program

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Pre-service teachers, through early field experiences, are able to be physically involved in real classroom settings providing better preparation for future and independent work with children. This article includes suggestions and strategies for planning or reforming early field experience programs. Information related to school-university partnerships and preparing students to work with diverse populations and students in general are included in the text.

Early experiential learning events, preceding a capstone student teaching semester, enable pre-service teachers to observe school-age students and teachers, work with individuals and small groups, and teach selected lessons on their own. Additionally the pre-service teacher may have the opportunity to assist with paper grading, assessments, and other responsibilities depending on the grade level and university requirements. Pre-service teachers are often required to complete assignments or research related to their experiences for one or more of their education courses.

Field experiences for pre-service teachers have been compared to medical student internships and residencies (Huling, 1998) and even learning to ice skate (Upitis, 1999). Although completely different areas of expertise, they are comparable in that their experiential style of learning provides for a more achievable outcome.

Successful and well planned field experiences are intended to benefit the pre-service teacher as well as the classroom teacher and students. This

paper shares successful examples of strategies and techniques from various field experience programs, literature citations, and my own personal experience as a Field Experience Director, with the intention of helping others implement a successful field experience program.

Strategies for Success

Getting started

School-University partnerships are necessary for teacher education programs to flourish. All teacher education programs should have a field experience committee. Whether a field experience plan is in place or being developed, a committee, complete with faculty, student, and public school representation, should meet annually to discuss what works and initiate any needed reform.

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) website (<http://www.ncate.org/institutions/unitstandardsrubrics>) suggests that the unit and school partners work together to design and apply field experiences and pre-service teacher assessments, and that school

and university personnel share the responsibility for pre-service teacher learning. If in the development stage, several meetings may need to take place.

There must be an agreement on the number of hours required of pre-service teachers for each individual field experience assignment and if those hours will be awarded credit as a course standing alone or as part of a course already in place.

Have designated and qualified supervisors, preferably faculty members, who have attended a training session related to the supervision of pre-service teachers in field experiences. The supervisor should be at the school to check attendance, communicate with school personnel, evaluate performance/progress, and intercept any problems that may occur.

Professors ideally should have group planning discussions so pre-service teachers are given a variety of constructive assignments to complete in the placement setting. These assignments should be “clearly summarized” and should not be “redundant” (Munby, Locke, Hutchinson, Whitehead & Martin, 1999, p. 42).

It is preferable to have a designated person who arranges placements and corresponds with school personnel. Too many university faculty contacting school system personnel can be disconcerting, considering the workload of those professionals. Pre-service teachers should not be allowed to make their own placements due to problems that could arise such as teachers being uncomfortable with the situation and placements being made in too familiar territory.

Inform pre-service teachers early of expectations

At some point in the teacher education program, pre-service teachers should be informed of expectations as a teacher candidate. Before pre-service teachers begin taking education

courses, perhaps as soon as they are accepted into the program, is a good time for them to complete an orientation process. In the orientation field experience requirements should be discussed. Pre-service teachers will learn that they will need transportation to and from the school site. There should also be a detailed discussion on professionalism (dress, conduct, behavior, etc.). It can be taken for granted that college students know what “not to say” and what “not to wear,” but many of these students are young and may not be aware of these conditions of protocol.

As Director of Field Experiences at a mid-sized public university in North Carolina for five years, I received my share of criticisms of pre-service teachers from principals and teachers. Examples include, forgetting to turn off cell phones, inappropriate dress, falling asleep, and even sometimes something bizarre like “ordering and having a pizza delivered during class,” as shared by a high school math cooperating teacher. These issues make for a good argument that pre-service teachers should have explicit items to be looking for and not just required to observe. These concerns should be addressed before arrival in the schools.

I once had a pre-service teacher upset that the school where she was placed would not allow her to observe because of her purple hair and numerous body piercings. Her response was, “I’m in college. I just wanted to do something crazy at a time in my life when I could.” I explained to her that in some school settings, her presentation could be considered distracting to the students and this was why the principal would not allow her to continue until she changed her outward appearance to be somewhat more conventional. It is sometimes difficult for teacher education students to comprehend the need for toning down personal character traits when moving from their personal life to professional existence in the world of teaching children. One pattern of personality typing has been labeled “Contextual Self” by Berens and Nardi (1999). “The contextual self

is who we are in any given environment. It is how we behave depending on what the situation requires” (p. 1). Pre-service teachers must realize that how they look and act may not always be appropriate at their workplace. Providing a copy of a “Teacher Code of Ethics,” found on most State Department of Public Instruction websites can be helpful.

Other simple requirements, such as signing in and out at the school site, learning about course assignments to be completed in the classroom, and what to do on teacher work days or inclement weather days should be explained to pre-service teachers. Examples of assignments pre-service teachers can expect include but are not limited to: keeping a reflective journal, administering assessments to students, completing pre- and post tests before and after teaching a lesson or unit of study, and writing a self evaluation of a videotaped lesson. Education faculty should take nothing for granted when working with pre-service teachers and local school systems. A good way to keep pre-service teacher’s attention at an orientation is to invite former field experience students to share their experiences in a question and answer session. “It is beneficial when former block students who are now classroom teachers return early each semester to talk to pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers respect former university students and feel comfortable conversing with them,” (Wadlington, Slaton, & Partridge, 1999, p. 340).

If possible, give pre-service teachers the option of grade levels or academic areas they prefer for their placements. Elementary and middle grade majors may be unsure of the grade level or academic area they wish to teach, so it would be beneficial for them to see a variety of grade levels and/or academic subjects. But, placing a secondary education major in an early childhood setting would be unwise.

Know the teachers and reputation of the school where you are placing pre-service teachers

This may not be as easy as it sounds, especially for the larger institutions, however, if teacher candidates are placed at random in schools the university is unfamiliar with and with little or unknown teachers, disaster may be the undesired outcome.

In 1999, the International Reading Association (IRA) charged the National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction to conduct a study on reading teacher preparation. One statement in their report, published in 2002, was that the exemplary teacher education programs in their study “recognized that (field experience) placement(s) should be deliberate, not haphazard” (p.7).

To ascertain quality field experiences with excellent teachers, it is necessary to have a cohesive school-university partnership. Murrell (1998) states that a partnership is:

an elementary, middle or high school in which school people and university people have agreed to work cooperatively to develop the capacities of all educators associated with the school. This includes both university faculty and classroom teachers, who work toward mutually-determined common goals for improving educational outcomes for the students in the school. (p.17)

Partnerships with local schools allow for a close relationship with much needed communication. Contact principals and ask for names of good teachers. Have a presence in the schools that can acquaint themselves with the teachers.

Keep the host or cooperating teachers informed at all times

Everyone involved should have a clear understanding of the expectations and requirements for pre-service teacher field experiences, including the cooperating teachers

(Woods & Weasmer, 2003). Cooperating teachers play an important role in preparing pre-service teachers to be quality teacher candidates. Many researchers believe cooperating teachers are the most important influence of pre-service teachers working toward teacher certification (Landt, 2004; Power & Perry, 2002). Inform teachers ahead of time in a letter or email of expectations the department has of them. Make sure teachers receive the names of the pre-service teachers placed with them at least one week before the placement begins. It helps to speak to the cooperating teachers in person if possible. Always thank the teachers and principals for working with pre-service teachers. It is an extra responsibility for them, often with no monetary rewards. Make sure pre-service teachers know to contact the school and teacher if they are going to be absent.

If possible, offer a half or full day training for host teachers and supervisors. Cover expectations of pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers and university supervisors. Distribute forms and contact information. Allow time for questions and discussion.

Offer incentives for cooperating teachers

It makes for a better partnership if the university shows they appreciate the school and teachers willingness to host pre-service teachers. An incentive, such as credit toward a graduate course, is a great way to cement your relationship and have a place for future assignments. Send them free passes to the university fitness center, and/or tickets to university plays and sporting events. Some universities are now paying teachers to host student teachers and practicum students. Unfortunately, many teachers do not want the hassle or worry of having an irresponsible or poor university student so they refuse to accept one at all.

The following is an example of how a university might compensate cooperating teachers

for their role with teacher education students: The cooperating teacher has three alternative payment methods he/she may choose. One choice is to receive a certificate of value from the University. This certificate of value can be redeemed by the cooperating teacher for the reduction of cost equal to one (1) graduate credit to any graduate class with three years to redeem the certificate. The second alternative payment is to receive \$100.00. The third alternative payment is to receive a ticket value of \$125.00 for a performing arts center event which must be redeemed within one year of being issued.

A university, with the support of administrators of local school corporations and agencies, may offer a “tuition bank credit system” for teachers who host pre-service teachers. Depending on the number of hours and type of field experience, teachers are allowed to “bank” tuition credits to use toward graduate courses. Guidelines for the calculation of tuition points are established based on a formula which considers students’ assigned “time” and “type of experience” in particular categories.

Allow for diverse experiences

Teachers need to have a better understanding of the cultures and backgrounds of the students in their classrooms. There are teachers who have limited experience working with students of diverse backgrounds therefore pre-service teachers should have a variety of field experiences in a variety of settings. One university field experience program encourages “every candidate to participate/teach in ‘different’ placements in order to confront issues of diversity (exceptional students and students from different ethnic, racial, gender, socioeconomic, language, and religious groups) that affect teaching and student learning and develop strategies for improving student learning and the candidates’ effectiveness as a teacher” (Kennesaw State University, 2009).

Pre-service teachers need more exposure and experience working with diverse groups of students as well as more integration of multiculturalism in their coursework. It is unfortunate that Irvine's (2003) findings show, "pre-service teachers have negative beliefs and low expectations of success for...[non white] students even after some course work in multicultural education" (p. xvi). With negative teacher attitudes to begin with, it is almost certain these students will not receive the attention and education they deserve.

Virtual classrooms are becoming more popular and can be an advantage if the university and school system has the technology required for implementation. It will not replace a true face-to-face experience; however, it can be beneficial if there are no other options. Service learning projects and tutoring in an after school program or other similar ideas are also beneficial, but the best scenario would be to place pre-service teachers in real classroom settings, where there is the ability to observe teachers in action and witness real problems and situations that occur in everyday teaching environments.

Require background checks

Before visiting a school, all pre-service teachers should have a background check (fingerprinting and SBI check) at the request of the university. Many school systems are already requiring this of university students and volunteers. Do this as soon as school visitations begin, not before the student teaching semester. These can be paid for by the university student upfront or can be incorporated into their tuition payment. The process is simple, requiring a visit to a local sheriff's department or courthouse to be fingerprinted. There are many campus police offices that are willing to handle this as well. The fingerprint is scanned and sent to the State Bureau of Investigation with a fee (varying among states). Later, the university student will

receive information regarding their criminal background history.

Student placements should take place during valuable instructional time

Fridays are generally not the preferred days for schools to have university observers, especially at the elementary and middle grade level. These days are sometimes set aside as special project, reward or fieldtrip days. Often, after lunch, students have recess, silent reading, teacher read aloud and nap, which are acceptable for observation, however allow little opportunity for involvement and observation of instructional practices, therefore mornings may be the best time for field experience placements. Some field experience programs or courses may require pre-service teachers to visit during these times, however the bulk of field experiences are expected to be during teacher guided instructional times. Determine when teacher planning times are at the middle and high school levels. These often last for an entire block, which could be as much as 90 minutes. Placement coordinators should be aware of these events before making field experience assignments.

Evaluations and Assessments

The field experience committee should be responsible for discussing and implementing forms for assessments and evaluation procedures for the pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers and the field experience program in general.

Pre-service teachers are assessed through their course assignments, teaching evaluations, and overall professionalism. Ryan (2003) maintains that, "Assessment is an essential characteristic of a good field experience program" (p. 4). One form of assessment technique earning positive results from many universities, are online teaching portfolios. Ryan explains that through these online portfolios, pre-service teacher's

work, reflections and analysis of the learning process are well documented.

Cooperating teachers and pre-service teachers should have an opportunity to evaluate each other and the field experience program and overall placement process. These evaluations can prove very beneficial when it comes time for making improvements to a program.

Conclusion

Pre-student teaching field experiences are an integral part of the teacher education program. Researchers have stated that field experiences are essential for pre-service teachers in making connections between theory and practice (Szabo, Scott, & Yellin, 2002). For placements to benefit pre-service teachers, they should be well planned in positive learning environments with quality educational professionals and institutions. University students and host or cooperating teachers as well as administrators on all levels should be well informed of the procedures and requirements. Pre-service teachers should have thoughtful and constructive assignments related to the observations. All involved parties should have an opportunity for input in the procedures and feel comfortable in making suggestions for reforming the process. Communication among university students, faculty, public school teachers and administrators is one of the most important factors for a successful field experience program.

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