

Building Relationships within Extended Field Placements in Elementary Education

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Abstract

Researchers, using qualitative methodology, investigated whether an extended model for organizing fieldwork could potentially elevate the skills, knowledge, and dispositions of Elementary (prek-6) teacher candidates in this study. Questionnaires, focus group interviews, and observations from the pre-service and veteran teachers provided data on the perceived benefits and drawbacks of remaining with the same teacher. Results indicate that the importance of relationships, time in the field with the same teacher and classroom, and high quality modeling from the veteran teachers are essential for a successful field experience. The findings of this study offer insights into the field experience and student teaching components of teacher education: illuminating the role of extended time in fostering relationships and providing more teaching opportunities for teacher candidates.

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With the heavy emphasis on standards, accountability and outcomes placed on public schools, teachers, and students, teacher education programs continually evaluate what is considered best practice in preparing future teachers. Accrediting bodies such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) have called for additional emphasis on not only the amount of time teacher candidates spend in clinical or field experiences, but the connection that is made between practice, academic content, and professional coursework (NCATE, 2010). Some suggest that a new paradigm for preparing teachers, one that includes academic, practitioner, and community expertise, is needed (Zeichner, 2010). In addition to content and pedagogical knowledge, teacher educators must also work to develop skills of collaboration within their teacher candidates, an important skill in the workforce and classroom (Liliane & Colette, 2009). What teacher educators cannot ignore are the developmental phases that occur as teacher candidates grow from students to teachers. Teacher education programs must address issues of professional identity, contextual acclimation, and knowledge development.

Field experiences have been used extensively as a method for integrating theory and practice to equip teacher candidates with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the demands of the profession. Unfortunately, these same field experiences that are recognized as critical in the preparation of teachers have also been criticized for lacking cohesiveness, appearing disjointed, and missing curricular definition, (Graham, 2006; Feiman-Nemser, 2001a; NCATE, 2001). Examining the specific needs of teacher candidates while extending and enhancing field experiences to help meet these unique needs, provided the foundation for this study. This study explored the perceived benefits and drawbacks for teacher candidates who stay with the same teacher for their field experience and student teaching. The questions we investigated were: What would the perceptions about this redesign for field experiences and student teaching be? What strengths would teacher candidates and cooperating teachers experience? What drawbacks would they encounter?

Literature review

The following review focuses on two areas of existing research in the field of teacher education; the significance of field experiences and the impact of extending those experiences. This review helped to inform our

question, select appropriate methods of investigation, and develop our conceptual framework (appendix).

Significance of Field Experiences

Practical, field-based experiences can help fulfill the needs of teacher candidates. Capraro, Capraro, and Helfeldt (2010) define field experiences “...as a variety of early and systematic P-12 classroom-based opportunities in which teacher candidates (TCs) may observe, assist, tutor, instruct, and/or conduct research” (p.131). Many believe that fieldwork better prepares teacher candidates for the profession they have chosen (Berliner, 1985; Darling-Hammond & Young, 2002; Lantham & Voight, 2007; Singh, 2006). Teacher candidates often remark on the benefits they received from their fieldwork. The classroom experience strengthens their confidence, allows them to practice skills they will use in their classrooms, familiarizes them with curriculum planning, and provides experience guiding student behavior (Anderson & Graebell, 1990; Howey & Zimpher, 1996; Kragler & Nierenberg, 1999). Fieldwork can offer the opportunities to adopt a teacher persona – figure out who one is as a teacher – and acclimate the teacher candidate to the ecological side of education. Kosnik and Beck (2003) describe the opportunities to learn the school culture and become involved in school-wide activities that promote an ecological understanding of the profession. Through fieldwork, the workings of a school beyond what an elementary student sees can become apparent to the teacher candidate.

Extending Field Experiences

This study extends the literature in several ways. Earlier studies have looked at teaching with a peer (Bullough et al., 2003), alternative short-term field placements (Author, 2008; Purdy & Gibson, 2008), and paired teaching placements (Smith, 2008). It is evident that increasing or modifying the field experience component has taken hold in education reform in many countries yet the typical design has changed little in the last 35 years (Bullough et al., 2003). There is little research however, on extending the field experience (Graham, 2006). One such study by Ewart & Straw (2005) found that teacher candidates who were placed in one setting for seven months garnered several benefits. Teacher candidates in this study were able to develop their own teaching style, integrate into the school culture, and foster relationships with their cooperating teachers that allowed for honest conversations about teaching. If it is accepted that teacher candidates grapple with issues of professional identity,

ecological acculturation, and knowledge and skill development, then remaining with a cooperating teacher for an extended period may provide opportunities for growth in these areas.

Methods

We framed our study using the following questions: What would the perceptions about this redesign for field experiences and student teaching be? What strengths would teacher candidates and cooperating teachers experience? What drawbacks would they encounter?

These questions helped to guide both our data collection and analysis from over 63 teacher candidates and their cooperating teachers.

Context

This study took place at a state university located in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States with a long-standing history of excellence in teacher education. The College of Education at our university is accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Teacher Candidates in the five year program earn a Master of Arts degree in teaching and apply for licensure to teach in preschool through sixth grade. By the time our teacher candidates enter student teaching during their fifth year, they have completed three field placements. The participants for this study included three groups of pre-service teacher candidates and their cooperating teachers. The study began in August of 2007 when the three groups spent one full day a week in a field experience and ended in early March of 2008 when they completed their first eight-week student teaching experience.

Group 1: Partnership for Realizing Improvement in Science and Math (PRISM). Sixteen teacher candidates self-selected to participate in the PRISM grant. The focus of the grant was on using robotics and GPS/GIS technology to enhance the teaching of science and math content in grades four, five, and six. Cooperating teachers working with the teacher candidates in this group were selected by school division administrators to participate in the PRISM grant. Four of the cooperating teachers were from a high-needs city school, six were from a different city school division, and another six teachers were from a rural school division. All of the selected cooperating teachers agreed to continue to supervise the teacher candidates for their first eight-

week student teaching placement.

Group 2 – Professional Development School (PDS) Model. Eight teacher candidates were randomly selected to work with cooperating teachers in a small city school division where the College of Education was investigating the creation of a professional development school model. Like the PRISM group, all of the selected teachers agreed to continue to supervise the teacher candidates for the first eight-week student teaching experience.

Group 3 – Traditional Model. The remaining 39 teacher candidates received field placements using traditional methods across the University's diverse service area. These teacher candidates were with one teacher and school for the full-day field experience and a different teacher and school for their first eight-week student teaching experience.

The College of Education's Education Support Center (ESC) selected the cooperating teachers for the traditional model. In this traditional model, the ESC asked principals to notify teachers of the opportunity to have a student for the one-day a week field experience or a student teacher. The ESC worked to ensure the broadest possible grade level placements across the program and student teaching experience. Cooperating teachers, through collaboration with the ESC, could earn part-time appointments as clinical faculty at our university upon completion of a developed training program.

Research Design

The process of designing a qualitative study does not start with the methods, but with the question and theoretical lens of the researcher (Creswell, 2007; Erickson, 1986; Mills, 2007). Using a qualitative approach in our research design, we sought to interpret why certain things happened rather than quantifying our findings (Eisner, 1991; Erickson, 1986; Falk & Blumenreich, 2005). Instead of viewing teachers and teacher candidates as research subjects, we honored their interpretations (Walsh, Tobin, & Graue, 1993). We collected data through interviews, observations, questionnaires, and small focus groups. Triangulation of these methods allowed us to present a plausible and credible account (Eisner, 1991; Hubbard & Power, 2003; Mills, 2007).

All 63 teacher candidates completed a questionnaire in the beginning of their field experience and at the

conclusion of their first student teaching placement. Because we were looking at possible changes over time, we needed to be able to compare early and later responses. Cooperating teachers of the PRISM and PDS model also received an initial questionnaire, and we received a return rate of 100 percent. We coded the records to preserve confidentiality, assigning a number to each returned questionnaire. The completed questionnaires helped us to focus and define our next steps of data collection, which included focus groups with both teacher candidates and cooperating teachers. Because experience strongly influences a teacher's beliefs and opinions, focus group questions were designed to be open ended in order to tap into the years of experience each particular teacher had working with teacher candidates. For both groups, the focus groups took the form of a conversation rather than a structured interview. Kvale (1996) argues that a benefit of the conversational interview is its ability to capture the "multitude of subjects' views of a theme and to picture a manifold and controversial human world" (p. 7). By participating in the focus groups, the cooperating teachers and pre-service teacher candidates helped clarify information from prior conversations, observations, and questionnaire responses. We also used email to facilitate interviews of cooperating teachers and pre-service teacher candidates who were located out of the area and unable to attend the focus group sessions.

Data Analysis

Analysis of qualitative data needs to be on going and thorough (Eisner, 1991, Mills, 2007; Hubbard & Power, 2003). The transcribed focus group interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses involved the use of content analysis (Krippendorft, 2004; Patton, 1990) to systematically search large amounts of text and refine those into smaller units or codes. The use of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) required reading and re-reading of the entire data set to look for emerging patterns and themes. Member checks were used once initial themes developed to address the issues of credibility and to ensure that our coding represented our participants' perspectives and made sense (Faulk and Blumenreick, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mills, 2007). Questionnaire responses were organized by coding the responses from which themes surfaced. When no new themes emerged and significant patterns of data became evident, data analysis was complete. The following three themes emerged (a) the importance of building relationships; (b) the ability to

teach more and observe less when placed with the same teacher and classroom for the extended time period; and (c) teacher candidates' ability to differentiate instruction due to increased understanding of the curriculum and students in the extended placement.

Findings and Discussion

The most significant benefits of the extended time in the same classroom allowed for the following positive outcomes:

- building relationships between students, teachers, families, schools, and teacher candidates,
- increasing teaching time and reducing time observing and transitioning,
- differentiating instruction due to increased understanding of the curriculum and students in the extended placement

Although the findings were overwhelmingly positive, one potential negative outcome surfaced. Cooperating teachers and teacher candidates expressed concern over having an extended field placement if personality clashes arose between the two parties. Each of the findings supported our conceptual framework, although the most salient of these was that of building relationships (both positive and negative). For this reason we have focused our discussion on the theme of building relationships and its implications for teacher education programs.

Building relationships

From the cooperating teachers' point of view, the benefits of staying with the same teacher for the one-day a week field experience and student teaching far outweighed the disadvantages, particularly in regards to the relationships they established. These relationships allowed the dyad to develop a professional dialogue where ideas were shared, confidence gained, and growth of the teacher candidates enhanced. As one third grade cooperating teacher put it, "I think it's easier to work together full-time when you've already gotten to know each other's styles in the field experience. For the children, there is continuity- the student teacher comes in already knowing their homes and a little bit about them" (*third grade teacher, 2-27-08*). Another teacher remarked, "We have developed a cooperative relationship so we will work together seamlessly in the classroom this year" (*fourth*

grade teacher, 2-27-08).

Many of the cooperating teachers talked about their ability to shape the development of the teacher candidates. “I want the opportunity to guide and support a new teacher that would be on her own soon” (*Teacher #6, 2-27*). Another remarked, “When I was student teaching, I had a horrible experience. I vowed that when I became established, I would try to make student teaching an excellent experience for the new teacher” (*Teacher #16, 2-27*).

All 26 teacher candidates who stayed in the extended placement valued the relationships that developed. They recognized the value the extended time afforded them.

I had a great experience. My teacher did many of the things I’ve learned about here [in the elementary education program]. She was very open to me (*Teacher candidate, 4th grade, 4-18*).

Staying in the same placement allowed me to develop stronger relationships with my students as well as my cooperating teacher (*Teacher candidate, 2nd grade, 4-18*).

I really appreciated being able to work as colleagues with teachers. It gave me more confidence about working with professionals (*Teacher candidate, 5th grade, 4-18*).

I thought the relationships I developed with my students, the school, and my teachers were invaluable. That never happened in my second student teaching placement. I missed the ‘family’ I had at my old school. (*Teacher candidate, 2nd grade, 4-18-08*)

For the teacher candidates, the relationships they developed with their teachers and students were a driving force behind their perception of success in this new model. However, the one drawback mentioned by a few cooperating teachers and teacher candidates involved the potential for personality conflicts. Three of the cooperating teachers noted that personality conflicts might be a serious drawback. One cooperating teacher noted, “If it was *not* a good experience in field experience it creates a long time with one classroom” (*cooperating teacher, 2-27-08*). The teacher candidates also raised the potential of personality conflicts, both in the initial and final questionnaires. This conflict did occur in two instances. To their credit, these teacher candidates worked hard

to see the positives in their placements. They met with us regularly to discuss their concerns and strategized ways to overcome the difficulties. They were able to turn the situation into a learning experience.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study offer insights into the field experience and student teaching components of teacher education: illuminating the role of extended time in fostering relationships and providing more teaching opportunities for teacher candidates. The power of building relationships was the most important finding. The idea of cooperating teachers and teacher candidates remaining together through a field experience and the first eight-week block of student teaching for a total of eight months helped address two developmental issues of teacher candidates: professional identity and contextual acclimation. Extended time allowed personal connections to be made professional to professional. Liliane and Colette (2009) have reported that this relationship can lead to shared knowledge as the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate assume various roles within the dyad. Discussion can allow the partnership to co-construct their knowledge of good teaching. These discussions and relationships can help the teacher candidates explore their professional identity. Teacher candidates exhibit a tendency to be “me” focused while participating in field experiences. Kagan (1992) concluded that initially teacher candidates are more cognizant of their own personal needs than they are with the needs of the children they are teaching. Through conversations and strong relationships with their cooperating teachers, teacher candidates can gain a stronger sense of who they are as teachers. Once they establish a professional identity, they can be more focused on the needs of the children and their learning.

The concept of building relationships transcended the teacher-candidate dyad, though. Kosnik and Beck (2003) discuss the value of understanding the school culture and participating in school-wide events with children and families. With the extended time at one placement, teacher candidates were afforded these opportunities to develop more in-depth relationships. Doing so provided candidates with a context for their teaching. While contexts vary across schools, regions, and countries, all teachers need to be cognizant of how their particular context shapes teaching and learning. The nuances of context are harder to discern in relatively short placements.

In addition, cooperating teachers believed the extended time in the classroom allowed the candidates to

develop stronger relationships with the students. For the children, they knew this “other adult” in the classroom. The only difference was now the teacher candidate was there every day, not just once a week. The period of adjustment was non-existent in January; that had taken place in August. Children had an existing relationship with the teacher candidate that continued to strengthen as the teacher candidate was there every day. These findings support the research on successful field experiences in Graham (2006) and the importance of affective engagement with teaching and learning.

If it is perceived that deeper relationships form and stronger skills develop in an extended placement model, then the implications for teacher education programs are clear. First, teacher education programs must design mechanisms so that the relationships to be developed are representative of the goals and ideals of the program. Extended time alone will not necessarily improve the abilities of the teacher candidates (Capraro et al., 2010). Extended time will only continue the status quo unless teacher education programs are explicit in the types of relationships to be developed. Teacher education personnel must ensure that the cooperating teachers they choose reflect the disposition, skills, and knowledge that teacher candidates should develop (Ewert & Straw, 2005). Cooperating teachers must be aware and accepting of the roles they are expected to assume. Without this alignment between expectations of the teacher education program and the cooperating teacher, positive outcomes cannot be guaranteed. To help ensure this alignment O’Brian, Stoner, Appel, and House (2007) concluded “...training for both the cooperating teacher and preservice teacher is necessary” (p. 273).

A second implication for teacher education programs is the need for programs to anticipate the potential drawback of personality conflicts between teacher candidates and cooperating teachers. This has major implications for program decisions. Teacher educators have a reactive and/or proactive alternative for this. Reactively, a mechanism must exist that allows resolution of such problems. O’Brian et al. (2007) suggested “...targeted support from university personnel... (p. 274)” as a means for resolving difficult dyads. It could be a supervisory system that operates as a third party to mediate problems, or a safety net system that removes a teacher candidate from a problematic situation. Some *out* must be available if a solution cannot be found. Most teacher preparation programs already have a process for reassigning teacher candidates if the need arises. More importantly, the issue of *fit* could be mediated with appropriate mentoring as suggested by Wang and Odell

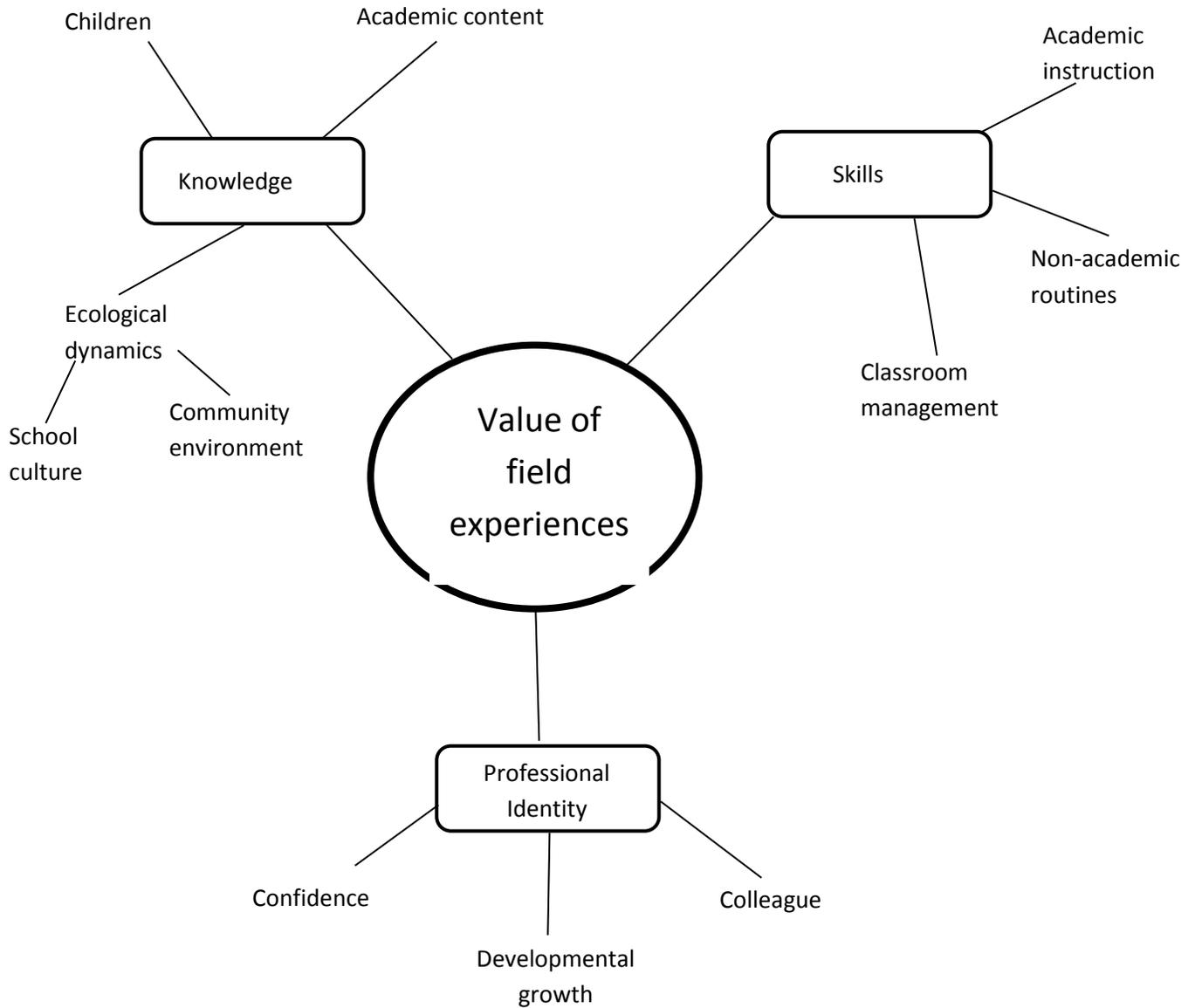
(2008). “The quality of beginning teachers’ initial beliefs and practices shape the quality of their learning when collaborative relationships among peers are encouraged and mentoring relationships are developed” (Wang & Odell, 2008, p. 147). Teacher education programs must ensure that cooperating teachers have these collaborative and mentoring skills.

Rather than relying on a reactive approach, teacher education program could act proactively to avoid issues of personality clashes. Individuals who know both the teacher candidates and the cooperating teachers should be involved in the process of matching the two for placement. Parker, Fazio, Volante, and Cherubini (2008) cite the importance of building on-going relationships among teacher candidates, school personnel, and faculty. They stress the need for “faculty counsellors” who become liaisons among stakeholders to maintain and sustain partnerships (p. 45). By knowing the personalities, one can decide the best mix for who will stretch whom in an atmosphere of professionalism. This is difficult to accomplish when placements are made where neither the teacher candidate nor cooperating teacher are known by the placement personnel making the decisions. As suggested by Graham (2006) using a more collaborative approach would allow the university to assist in the selection and matching process to alleviate this concern. This would also foster the development of professional relationships in which discussions of professional practice promote growth for both the cooperating teacher and the teacher candidate.

Overwhelmingly, cooperating teachers and teacher candidates stated that the benefits of the continued relationship developed in the initial field experience through student teaching far outweighed the drawbacks. This is consistent with the idea that teacher training is a continuum, rather than composed of isolated stages (Wang & Odell, 2008). The challenges faced in this study mirror those revealed in the literature on redesigning teacher education: How do we immerse learning to teach in the practice of teaching (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Dangel, Dooley, Swars, Truscott, Smith, & Williams, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Zeichner, 1984, 2010)?

As a result of the findings within this study, our elementary education program has made changes in its field placements. Teacher candidates in their graduate year now spend two days a week in a field placement instead of one. When they move into student teaching, they remain with the cooperating teacher with whom they

had practicum for one of their two eight-week blocks. The only time this does not happen is when a teacher candidate elects to student teach outside the local area where the university is located. Teacher candidates and cooperating teachers continue to praise this model of field experiences.



Value of Field Experiences Conceptual Framework

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