

## **Growing Through Field-Based Experiences**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the importance of field-based experiences in the preparation of teacher candidates. The author cites the research and experienced opinions of experts in the field of teacher preparation. Included in this discussion of the importance of field-based experiences is the ability of teacher candidates to link theory to practice, understand the importance of collaboration, participate in continued professional development, and utilization of resources.

*Keywords:* teacher preparation, field-based experiences, collaboration

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Teachers bear a responsibility to prepare the next generation of our nation's citizens. Through utilizing a variety of instructional strategies, teachers provide children the cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioral tools which enable them to become competent, caring, and contributing citizens. The lives that a teacher touches over the course of his or her career are numerous and the influence a teacher can have on learners is profound. Based on this understanding of the important function of educators, the preparation of teachers is of utmost importance to our society as a whole (Ambe, 2006; Bruning, 2006; Darling-Hammond, & Baratz-Snowden, 2005; Murphy, Delli, & Edwards, 2004; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, n.d.; Wise & Leibbrand, 2000).

There has been and continues to be an enormous amount of public focus recently examining teacher quality and preparation (Cochran-Smith, 2006). The general conclusion is that for there to be a change in K-12 students, there must be a change in those who teach those students. An effort to increase teachers' proficiency and efficacy is a critical component in making necessary changes to the American education system (Bruning, 2006; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). As a result of this focus, reforms have been enacted to create more rigorous teacher preparation programs.

Colleges and universities have the challenge of assuring their programs of study provide the curricular and experiential components to generate teacher candidates who are well-prepared for today's classrooms and the challenges found within. National and state teaching standards provide a framework upon which teacher education programs can build their curriculum; however, it is the responsibility of higher education entities to interpret the standards and employ them in the creation and delivery of their teacher preparatory programs.

Within this process of analyzing and applying standards, there is opportunity for great variance in interpretation. Therefore, the responsibility falls on individual education programs to further identify, through empirical research, characteristics of effective education programs and from that data build their curriculum on the foundation of best practices (Cochran-Smith, 2006; Comer & Maholmes, 1999; Dean, Lauer, & Urquhart, 2005; Scannell, n.d.). As this research is conducted, the component which most often is identified as characteristic of a good teacher preparation program is the need for early and numerous opportunities to practice teaching in field based experiences (Larson, 2005).

In one study of graduates of teacher education programs responses indicated three major recommendations for program improvement: a) more observation time in a wider variety of schools with a wider variety of students and experienced classroom teachers, b) more time and opportunities to engage in actual teaching, and c) closer supervision with constructive feedback (Darling-Hammond, Hudson, & Kirby, 1989). A noted short-coming shared by teacher education graduates is the existence of a large gap between theory, classroom practice, and utility of coursework. Furthermore, the referral to a lack of a connection between theory and practice in teacher preparatory programs seems to increase after teacher candidates have spent some time in the classroom.

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) indicated that numerous teacher education programs separate theory from application citing that in some places, "...teachers were taught to teach in lecture halls from texts and teachers who frequently had not themselves ever practiced what they were teaching" (p. 31). In addition, often teacher candidates would complete their coursework before they began student teaching and there was seldom a

connection made between what they were doing in their classrooms to what they had learned in their programs.

Jacobs (2001) argued that teacher preparation programs should design their own curriculum after Vygotsky's scaffolding model. This model would provide teacher candidates with a firm, theoretical foundation and offer opportunities for teacher candidates to put this theory to use in actual classrooms. It is imperative for teacher education programs to provide structured opportunities to practice instructional strategies in the classroom setting.

Learning by doing is for teacher candidates an effective leaning model, just as is true with their learners in a school setting. Teacher candidates must be given opportunities to read and reflect, collaborate with other teacher candidates, and share their ideas and experiences. Learning in this manner enables teachers to span the gap from theory to practice. Model teacher education programs establish practices that encourage teacher candidates to learn about teaching through practice by providing opportunities to participate in settings that create strong connections between theory and practice (Kent, 2005; Larson, 2005).

Therefore, teacher preparation programs must provide multiple and positive opportunities for teacher candidates to observe, assist, and practice teaching. Scannell (n.d.) identified field experiences as a critical component in teacher preparation programs. These opportunities in school settings allow teacher candidates to build self-confidence and a sense of readiness which will ultimately result in a positive disposition about their own readiness to teach effectively. Jacobs (2001) suggested that opportunities to work with children in authentic surroundings begin in introductory education courses and continue throughout their teacher preparation program.

In effective teacher preparatory programs, professors of pedagogy use actual artifacts from the classroom, examples of student work, tapes of classrooms in action, and case studies of teaching to help teacher candidates connect what is being modeled and what they are learning in their courses to actual problems of practice in classrooms (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2005). Through field-based practice, teacher candidates are given the opportunity to reveal what they actually know and demonstrate what they can do (Wise & Leibrand, 2000). An ongoing argument is made for the need for connection between theory and practice, and field-based experiences are the best way to ensure this connection is made for teacher candidates.

Beyond the “hands-on” site-based practice with students, other qualities/dispositions of effective teacher candidates, such as professionalism, can also be honed during field-based experiences. Professionalism refers to the dispositions that a teacher must possess in order to be successful in the classroom. These dispositions encompass the areas of collaboration, continuing professional development, and awareness of and utilization of resources. Darling-Hammond, Wise, and Klein (1999) discussed teaching professionalism in the following way:

Teaching dispositions are the orientations teachers develop to think and behave in professionally responsible ways- for example, to reflect on their teaching and its effectiveness and to strive for continual improvement; to respect and value the needs, experiences, and abilities of all learners and to strive to develop the talents of each to the greatest extent possible; to engage with learners in joint problem solving and exploration of ideas; to establish cooperative relationships with students, parents, and other teachers to keep abreast of professional ideas, and to engage in broader professional responsibilities. (p. 39)

## **Collaboration**

Linda Darling-Hammond (1999a) addressed how education reform not only focuses typical areas such as curriculum and instruction, diversity and assessment, but also how to work collegially with others. Teaching is not a career in where one works in isolation. Interpersonal skills of communication and collaboration are integral components in the art of effective teaching. Teacher candidates must learn how to collaborate with other teachers, administrators, community support agencies, and families of learners.

First, teacher candidates must acquire social skills in before they can establish and maintain working relationships. Collaboration with teachers and other educational professionals serves as an opportunity to share knowledge as well as ideas from seasoned practitioners on best practices. Teacher education can provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to understand what it means and what it feels like to be members of a group that shares common goals.

Collaboration with families is imperative student success. Comer and Maholmes (1999) specified the importance of building the skills of teacher candidates to help increase the frequency of and improve the involvement of parents/guardians. Parents/guardians, by nature, are the most knowledgeable of the preferences and practices of their children. Thus, they possess useful information to offer and must be viewed as partners in the educational process. In addition to the opportunity to experience group membership, teacher preparation programs must provide teacher candidates with techniques on how to work effectively with parents/guardians of students.

Ryan and Cooper (2007) indicated that there is sometimes an air of superiority that teachers emanate toward students' caregivers. This attitude is in complete contradiction to the spirit of cooperation and communication that is essential for creation of a positive learning environment.

The ability to communicate with parents among many qualities of good teachers as outlined by the public was described by Berry (2005). Teacher candidates must learn how to work cooperatively with parents/guardians and consider themselves members of a team cooperating to provide a rich educational experience for the child.

### **Continuing Professional Growth**

Beginning teachers must learn skills that allow them to apply what they are learning, analyze what is happening, and enable them to adjust their teaching methodology accordingly. Teacher candidates need to engage in inquiry and reflection about learning, teaching, and curriculum (Bruning, 2006). Ryan and Cooper (2007), in their research, addressed the importance of being a reflective decision maker in planning, implementing, and evaluating decisions.

Teacher candidates hold firm beliefs about the teaching profession long before they enter the classroom and these persist throughout their teacher preparation and into their early years of teaching (Fajet et al., 2005). Therefore, the examination of teacher candidates' perceptions about teaching is important for evaluation of teacher preparation programs. Such an evaluation can assist in aligning prospective teachers' previously held beliefs with the pedagogical practices that they will have learned and will put into practice in their subsequent teaching careers.

Fajet et al. (2005) found that teacher candidates' perceptions suggest that teacher preparation courses do little to alter the perceptions students develop during their 12 or 13 years of public school experiences. "It appears from the findings of Fajet's study that education majors underestimate the complex nature of teaching. Fajit's results demonstrated that teacher candidates assign great importance to their personal characteristics and less importance to pedagogical training" (Fajet et al., 2005, p. 724). Teacher educators need to be aware of this research on teacher

candidate perceptions which shows that core beliefs tend not to change over time. With this knowledge, teacher educators may take appropriate steps to provide instruction and guidance to assist teacher candidates in overcoming their preconceptions and any misconceptions of education.

Jacobs (2001) suggested that teacher preparation programs must strive to create good decision makers and in order to accomplish this, teacher candidates must be provided time and opportunities to reflect on their experiences. Teacher candidates need to be taught how to analyze and reflect on their field experiences, to assess the effects of their teaching on learners, and to refine their instructional methods. Teacher candidates must be taught through modeling by their pedagogy professors how to set clear goals and develop a sense of purpose. This modeling will enable the teacher candidates to make sensible, consistent decisions about what to teach, in what sequence, and with which methodology.

Additionally, self-confidence is a vital factor in teachers' and teacher candidates' satisfaction and feelings about their work. According to Darling-Hammond, Wise, and Klein (1999), teachers who lack confidence in their teaching skills or possess doubt about their abilities to help students learn have higher rates of absenteeism and attrition. This attitude would clearly affect how effective a teacher candidate can be in their instruction. Teacher candidates must be provided with a preparatory program that leaves them feeling prepared for the classroom, so they are confident in their abilities as they enter the field of education.

### **Resources**

Proof of professionalism in the field of education comes in many forms. One additional area of professional growth is knowledge of available resources. Ryan and Cooper (2007) described characteristics of effective teaching. This included the necessity of knowing what

resources are available to assist new teachers develop their instructional strategies. These resources include such tools as videos, research materials, teaching journals, as well as human support in the form of co-workers, administrators and specialists.

Teacher candidates need to develop the skills of identifying useful resources and how to utilize those resources in their own classrooms (Bruning, 2006). Teacher preparation programs must help teacher candidates identify the role of resource agencies and instill in the teacher candidates the understanding of how those agencies may be an integral part of the educational arena. Darling-Hammond, Banks, Zumwalt, Gomez, Sherin, Griesorn et al. (2005) discussed the importance of the knowledge of resources:

Knowledge of the types of curriculum material and resources available at particular grade levels and for particular subject areas-and the ability to evaluate the utility of these for various purposes-is particularly useful to beginning teachers. Prospective teachers should be aware of major resources in the field and those that are in use locally, and know how to find additional resources and critically assess what is available. (p. 189)

Through well-planned field experiences, teacher candidates will be afforded the opportunity to work with skilled and experienced teachers, administrators, parents, and other schools support service personnel to identify types of resources available as well as the correct way to utilize these resources.

It is vital that teacher preparatory programs constantly monitor the expectations and responsibilities placed on classroom teachers, and then subsequently examine their teacher education programs to assure the curriculum provided is designed to address the needs of the

school setting where teacher candidates are placed. Professors of pedagogy must keep abreast of changing school climates and expectations placed on teachers. This will enable the altering of education programs curricula, resulting in the development of teacher candidates equipped with the knowledge and ability to adapt to these climates and become effective teachers.

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