

Clinical experience for teacher candidates: taking preparation beyond the four walls

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Abstract

Professors are encouraged to examine the extent to which students are affected by the various aspects of their teaching and the teacher preparation experience. Typically, at the beginning of the semester professors disseminate to their teacher education candidates a course syllabus delineating the nature of the course and evaluation criteria. After providing descriptive information about the course, the evaluation component of the syllabus may read something like a cooking recipe: chapter quizzes 20%, class presentation 15%, research paper 15%, midterm and final exams 15% each, class attendance and participation 10%, and field-based clinical experience 10%. An obtained 90% average across all criteria often amounts to an “A” for the course. Now, everyone is off to the races for the semester. But as the end nears, a legitimate question may be raised, which criteria were proclaimed by the candidates as the one(s) that helped them to know whether or not teaching is really for them? This manuscript points out that the multi-faceted teacher preparation efforts between the four (4) hallowed walls of the university do have their place in producing a quality teacher. However, for students to get a true feeling for the career upon which they are embarking, field-based clinical experience perhaps has unrealized potential. Along with the discussion of the crucial aspects of teacher preparation, this manuscript also highlights what candidates have to say about their field-based clinical experience, which makes the case for its importance.

Keywords: Course syllabus, effective teaching, field-based clinical experience, teacher education, and teacher preparation.

Introduction

For school systems to be effective and for No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to have significant impact on school children, teacher education programs must prepare personnel capable of improving student learning. This means not only being effective with college classroom activities, but also expanding the preparation process through appropriate field-based clinical experience. The literature emphasizes the importance of field experiences (O'Brian & et al. 2007), but little attention seems to be given to what the experience actually does to candidates. This suggests that there may be untapped potential for strengthening teachers from investigating how field-based experiences affect teacher candidates.

The present-day paradigm for preparing teacher educators is predominately situated between the four hallowed walls of the university. Professors believe strongly in the power of the lecture, the use of PowerPoint presentation, and some occasional media display. To be successful, students must skillfully develop their ability to listen intently, take detailed notes, and to score well on examinations. But in retrospect, how excited are students about this paradigm and how effective is it in developing quality candidates? A major portion of the secret might lie outside of the four walls.

This manuscript provides a role and scope view of teacher education. Attention focuses on the need for competent teachers, the job of the college professor, the basic tenets of teacher education training, different types of field-based experiences, and the potential value of field-based clinical experience. It concludes with some preliminary evidence which suggests that field-based experience means a lot to preservice personnel in turning them on to the profession.

The Need for Competent Teachers

Effective schools are essential to the economic well-being, vitality, and future of this country. To adequately staff American schools, Edelstein (2004) pointed out that there will be a need for about 2 million new teachers over the next 8 to 10 years as the baby-boom generation begins to retire and there is continued growth in the public school population. Also, over the next few years, most schools will have to strive to meet the mandates of the NCLB Act and place highly qualified teachers in every classroom. The NCLB defines a highly qualified teacher as one that is fully licensed by the state and endorsed in the subject area with no licensure requirements waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis and who demonstrates competence in the content areas taught (Kansas National Education Association, 2005).

Teachers are sorely needed in urban areas. To impact this problem, for example, the Harvard (n.d.) Teacher Education Program's (TEP) commitment is to identify, educate, and place highly qualified teacher-leaders in urban public schools. The position is that by applying greater expertise and demanding better results, teachers will help bring about a dramatic expansion of educational opportunity and quality at all levels.

In another situation, Montana had a shortage of special education teachers and responded by instituting a pilot emergency endorsement program. To evaluate the effectiveness of the program, the participants were asked, Did they prepare you for the reality of teaching special education? The overwhelming response was yes, as much as

possible, but nothing prepares you for being out in the field. Many indicated the co-teaching and practicum experience taught them the most (Fishbaugh & Christensen, 1998).

The Job of the College Professor

College teacher education programs are held accountable for preparing quality teachers for American schools. The college professor is the key in the establishment of an effective learning environment to fulfill this mission. To meet the challenge, college teachers need to have enthusiasm, dedication, content knowledge, and organization among other qualities. Research has documented the importance of caring, compassion, empathy, trust, and love within educational settings (Straits, 2007). The result is that affective characteristics in teachers promote achievement, positive attitudes, motivation, and learning in students. Straits (2007) proceeded to list indicators of caring instruction as being available to students, showing respect for students, a willingness to give extra effort, welcoming questions from students, inviting discussion outside of class, getting to know students, wanting students to learn and succeed, offering multiple learning opportunities, utilizing various teaching strategies, providing many different resources, and promoting higher-level thinking skills.

The Nature of College Teacher Education Training

There are some basic elements in college teacher education. Essential aspects of the process include the preparation of a course syllabus, delivery of instruction, use of technology/particularly the PowerPoint, assessment and evaluation of student performance, student presentations and research reports, class participation, and perhaps some field-based experience. Some elaboration is provided on these crucial aspects of teacher preparation.

The course syllabus

The course syllabus is an outline for the course. There are at least four distinct purposes served by a well-developed syllabus: a contract, a communication device, a plan, and a cognitive map. As a contract the syllabus represents an agreement between the professor and the students. Components of the syllabus consist of the professor's name, course name, number and section, location of office, time schedule for class, office hours, phone numbers, textbook information, reading list, instructional methods, course objectives, and testing information. It can be an effective communication device by specifying the intent, seriousness, and expectations for the course. It represents an overall plan of action for the course by conveying its mission, strategies, and goals. It is a cognitive map for an educational adventure by indicating the destination, method of travel, and routes to take. The syllabus also speaks specifically to the grading system, attendance and class participation, and provides a schedule of class activities (Altman & Cashin, n.d.; Matejka & Kurke, 1994).

As an illustration of evaluation criteria for a course, the Disney College program practicum course syllabus stipulates: attendance and class participation 20%, annual

report worksheet 10%, individual informative speech 15%, case study worksheet and discussion 5%, applied learning journal 10%, community responsibility paper 10%, corporate culture reflections paper 10%, and final exam 20%. In order to earn a passing grade, the student must receive an overall score of 70% or better (Disney College, 2007).

Classroom instruction

The lecture method is often a principal practice used in teacher preparation programs. Becker and Schneider (n.d.) assembled a list of eight simple rules for keeping students focused and motivated in classroom teaching. The time-honored suggestions apply to any course that students find hard or boring. The rules include:

- Emphasize the most critical concepts continuously;
- Provide students with “visual aid” when possible to explain abstract concepts;
- Rely on logic when applicable, show students how to employ logical thinking to learn and retain new information;
- Use in-class activities to reinforce newly presented material, e.g., allow them to work in small groups;
- Help students create a “link” when teaching something new, relate it to something already learned;
- Treat students with respect, give students their dignity and they will give you their best efforts; and
- Hold students to high standards, maintaining high standards not only will motivate student learning, it will also be the source of students’ feelings of accomplishment when those standards are met.

The authors stated that each rule can help motivate even the most lethargic student, but the last two rules are the most important. If students are not treated with respect and held to high standards, merely following the other rules will have much less impact and might end up being an exercise in futility.

Presentations and reports

As stated earlier, the instructor should provide students with “visual aid” when possible to explain abstract concepts. A significant proportion of today’s students are visual learners. For these students, a simple diagram or flowchart truly can be more valuable than a thousand words in a text or a lecture (Becker & Schneider, n.d.). It was reported that the PowerPoint can bring renewed energy and changed direction to the lecture format by stimulating interest, improving note taking, and promoting higher-order thinking. PowerPoint also has the potential to increase and maintain student interest and attention to the lecture when combined with active teaching and student involvement. Another observation was that students today are happier learning from display, an approach that combines both visual and aural stimuli (Clark, 2008).

The belief is that digital technology will allow education to be increasingly customized to the needs of the learner and that learning will become increasingly efficient and accessible. Research encourages the use of new technologies to build structures for active forms of student learning that were not possible before. The PowerPoint should be supplemented with multimedia educational tools to allow students

to own their learning and to collaborate in authentic and productive ways in the classroom (Schrand, 2008).

Thomas, Place and Hillyard (2008) explored how visual images (graphs, photographs, video, maps, and visual models) could support teaching goals and when they actually interfered with student learning. They found that the creation and analysis of visual images provide a rich setting for the understanding of tool use and for the development of complex and abstract ideas. However, the accessibility of visual images does not always support student learning. It is important to surround the use of visual images with instructional strategies that help them “see the strange in the familiar.”

Quizzes and examinations

The recommended way to design tests is to develop them from lectures and the text material that were suggested as most important for students to study. Students complain about professors who lecture on topics and then test by using test banks provided by the author. The syllabus should indicate if grading will be on a scale or point system, if a curve will be used, if there will be quizzes, if class participation will be graded and if so, how and what percentage of the grade each will be worth. It should also indicate how many tests will be given, when, what types of questions will be asked and if they will assess memory, understanding, synthesis, logic, or application. Rapid feedback is most efficacious and greatly appreciated by students (Matejka & Kurke, 1994).

Class attendance and participation

If students are to learn to apply, analyze, synthesize, etc., they need to be active. Such approaches may be contrary to the experiences and preferences of many students. So if active participation is expected and class attendance is required, the syllabus needs to indicate it. It also needs to explain if and how the two will be graded (Altman & Cashin, n.d.; Matejka & Kurke, 1994).

Given its prevalence and weight in the course syllabus, class participation and class attendance clearly register as important to faculty. According to Jones (2008), the general intents behind class participation and attendance are: accountability, answer questions when called upon; involve more learners, get more students to speak up; and stimulate thinking and recall of information, invite recall (use) of information. The author listed the types of class participation as:

- Initiate-respond-evaluate, the instructor initiates question or dilemma, student responds, instructor evaluates answer;
- Cold-calling, call on students at random;
- Open and unstructured talking, instructor tosses out a deeper or more probing question and waits for student to respond thoughtfully; and
- Fully and stimulated discussion, may be a prompt or task to be completed by students in advance of conversation in class.

Both the professor and the other students should be able to profit and move forward from contributions of individual students (Jones, 2008).

Field-based clinical experience

The field experience goal is to broaden students' education by active involvement in practical environments. Ideally this should happen in a setting that involves students in teamwork and that provides an opportunity for interdisciplinary experiences (Williams, n.d.).

Length and nature of the field experience vary from program to program. For example, the Disney College program practicum course requires 37 contact hours and 24 hours of directed activities. The course uses a directed working and learning experience to expand knowledge of successful organizational practices. It is designed to meet a participant's need for an integrated work-study internship program that provides transferable knowledge and skills to all participants. Class content is delivered through lectures, group discussions, learning activities, and situational studies (Disney College, 2007).

All the components of a course add up to a larger change that professors wish to see happen in students. The challenge is, are professors, in fact, valuing what they think they are and getting what they hoped they would through the class. Professors want to give students in their classrooms the tools to develop an understanding of the world, not just master specific content areas. In the process of using tools, such as data displays, questions, and analytic frameworks, students learn to think in ways that are practiced by experts. Students learn to describe, analyze, problem solve, and notice what is significant in a particular discipline or interdisciplinary field (Thomas, Place & Hillyard, 2008). Through field experience students must find and use their voice as emerging professionals. In so doing students reveal their core philosophy, decision-making process, and thought processes. Students begin to establish a presence as a teacher, an important transition away from being simply a student (Jones, 2008).

The Types of Field-Based Experiences

Among teacher education programs, as stated earlier, the types of field experiences vary considerably and so does the terminology. Terms used include fieldwork, field experience, practicum, internship, and student teaching to identify a student teaching experience and/or an experience in schools prior to student teaching (O'Brian & et al., 2007).

The Potential Value of Field-Based Experience

In field-based clinical experience, knowledge obtained and skill-application come together. The desire to teach and the ability to teach meet. Yet, perhaps more profound, lasting impressions are made and the course for becoming a true professional is chartered.

In spite of variance in terminology, the literature notes that field experiences are extremely important both for and to preservice teachers. Candidates have the opportunity to observe and participate in classrooms which may help them to determine if teaching is the appropriate career choice for them. They are able to apply what they have learned in their coursework to "real-world" classroom situations and learn to be flexible and more confident while "testing out" this knowledge (O'Brian & et al., 2007).

At UC San Diego (n.d.), the three main goals of the practicum are academic development, civic engagement and personal growth. For academic development students apply classroom knowledge to the real world, improve communication skills, and create original intellectual or creative contributions. For civic engagement students gain a sense of personal responsibility, ability to effect change, and a sense of ethical civic engagement and understand how their practicum goals and practices are informed by culture. For personal growth students learn to assess their own effectiveness as part of a team and as part of the larger community and to cultivate persona.

In discussing personal epistemology, a window into preservice teacher learning, Bondy and et al. (2007) stated that the way students approach learning is influenced by their beliefs about knowledge and knowing. Of the three representative groups illustrating the ways teachers respond to experiences in a teacher education program, the researchers listed one as the “just show me what to do” type. This teacher candidate found the most valuable training experiences to be field placements. She valued experiential learning or opportunities to observe and implement teaching practice and stated that she liked field experiences so much because the way to really learn something is by doing it. In the interview, the candidate rarely mentioned any connections she had made between her university-based coursework and what she was learning about classroom management or instruction while working in elementary classrooms during field placements. She discussed what she learned in classes in terms of the assignments she was required to complete and suggested that some of the coursework could be consolidated to make more time for field experiences. She went on to say that her field experiences working with struggling students changed the way she thought about them; she grew to want to help them and saw that they had that spark to learn and complete assignments and she really enjoyed working with them. This candidate valued classroom-based experience and other opportunities to observe and apply specific practices. The “let me think about this” and “just give me what I want” types varied in their responses but all three types expressed an eagerness for practical tools to help them implement the concepts they were learning and yearned for vivid images of the activity of teaching and learning.

Two feasible ways to assess the effectiveness of the field experience are interviews (e.g. with cooperating teachers and preservice teachers) and examination of the reflective logs of the preservice teachers during the field experiences. It has been reported that the ability to work within an authentic context provides a deep level of learning that cannot be attained in coursework alone. Providing preservice teachers with the opportunity in the field to learn the art and science of teaching is of utmost importance for teacher preparation programs. Some specific candidate-reflection log statements reported by O’Brian & et al. (2007) were:

- “I got to go through it (teaching) and do it myself;”
- “I felt like she saw me, not as just a student, she saw me as a colleague that could implement lessons and do all this stuff the same as she could;”
- “I am making mistakes, I am not perfect, but I’m doing it and it’s working;” and
- “The teacher in me is starting to come out.”

What Our Candidates had to say about their Field-Based Experience

Jones (2008) stated that all courses can be beneficial to students; however, students will advance their thinking if they are given opportunities to produce evidence of what they have learned. Students' thoughts and conclusions deserve critical review as to whether they stand or fall on their merits. The author further noted that "knowing," a common goal for college classes is elevated to a higher and more meaningful level when it both serves and is the product of thinking and contemplation. Some of these thoughts on learning are apparent in the following report on a particular field-based experience.

Description of field-based experience

At Jackson State University all teacher education majors are required to take the course – Exceptional Children and Youth in the Schools. The purpose of the course is to study definitions, classifications, educational programs, and problems of exceptional children. One of its requirements for candidates is to complete a minimum 10-hour field-based clinical experience in a school to affiliate with exceptional learners. They observe teaching and learning practices that are implemented at the school. The rubric for excellence is an experience in which the candidate reports to the field site on time each day of the observation period and completes and submits a reflective observation report.

Candidates' reflections

Candidates' reflective observation reports must evidence use of specific observation techniques to indicate roles of the teacher, any diversity issues, and contain personal reactions to the field-based clinical experience. The reflective observation report must follow the given reporting guidelines, demonstrate proficient command of the English language, and provide exemplary documentation to support presented data.

For two semesters the professor of record for the course evaluated the reflective observation reports and extracted "relevant" statements that students made to express what the field-based experience especially meant to them. The expressions were compiled and shared with the departmental faculty and the participating school to inform the profession. As research was conducted for this manuscript, it was discovered that three key goals for a practicum are academic development, civic engagement, and personal growth (UC San Diego, n.d.). Because of the professor's concern for the affective domain, the development of passion to teach was offered as a fourth goal. With the four goals delineated, the compilation of candidate expressions for fall and spring semesters of 2007-08 was reviewed and sample statements were selected for each goal as listed in Table 1 (Reflective observation report files, 2007-08).

Table 1
What Clinical Field-Based Experiences Means to Teacher Candidates:
Selected Responses by Field-Based Experience Goals

Academic development

- “The student was doing percentages and seemed to really know what she was doing. She only looked to me for encouragement that she was going in the right direction. I gave it to her freely.”
- “I was assigned a 7th grade student. I was excited but nervous. I observed as the student was working on her math, which isn’t my strongest subject.”
- “Today an amazing thing happened. I saw teaching at its best. She used a demonstration to teach the differences between parallel lines and perpendicular lines. Experience gained from such an opportunity is priceless.”

Civic engagement

- “My observation has shown me that what most children need is a wonderful support system and I believe that I can (be) that!”
- “The experience was interesting. I saw that those students really needed me there.”
- “I thought it was nice how the students were having a friendly competition against each other in an effort to get to the right answer. I would consider teaching at a school like (this) in the future.”

Personal growth

- “Today I was dressed to impress and on time. It was fun to have made (a) difference in someone’s life. I was very excited (about) coming back next week.”
- “Most importantly for me, I learned about myself. I learned to not look at the world with rose colored lenses because there are real problems going on and I might be able to help someone if I just open up my eyes.”
- “My overall experience at (school) was one of the most effective, influential and memorable experiences of my life. Being under the supervision of one of the best teachers I have met thus far, I truly believe that I can become a very effective educator and a productive member of society.”

Passion to teach

- “My second day was just as wonderful as my first day. With all the observation I have done over time, the journey to becoming a teacher has made me more anxious to start my new career as a teacher.”
- “I think we all are going to be great teachers just by some of the experiences we have had at this school.”

- “This was very rewarding to me. Although times have changed, the passion teachers have for their students is still there. I am honored to have had the chance to work with the children and accompany the teachers at (school).”

Discussion of expressions

The candidates, for the most part, first reported for the course with a quiet, unassuming demeanor. They gave the impression that this was just another course and that a satisfactory grade in the end would be sufficient. Initially, they offered little in class discussion and scored only moderately well on assessments. Through considerable inviting on the part of the professor, class began to come alive and class participation and performance improved (Course record files, 2007-08). After discussing expectations for the field experience, it was time to face students in a real school. At first, the candidates appeared a bit timid or nervous by the new experience. But after interacting with the school personnel and students, things seemed to suddenly change and lights came on about the possibility that they may be able to make a difference in the life of students. At that point, they were willing to completely commit themselves to the task and enthusiastically write about their experience.

Categorically, the candidates’ experiences seemed to well reflect the four goals of field-based experience: academic development, civic engagement, personal growth, and a passion to teach. However, the demeanor of the candidates at the beginning of the course and their disposition at the end of the field experience appeared markedly different in terms of improvement. Their statements in Table 1 attest to this conclusion. It was gratifying to discover that the field-based clinical experience, along with the coursework, meant so much to the teacher candidates.

When Coursework and Field Experiences Come Together

The objective for a progressive teacher education program is to have students participate in intensive and well-integrated coursework and field experiences that require continuous integration of theory and practice. Standards for the coursework are delineated in earlier sections of this manuscript.

Further addressing the field-based component, carefully planned and supervised practicum experiences provide students with opportunities to apply what they are learning in coursework in schools and other educational settings. These experiences may be sequenced to permit each student to demonstrate increasing levels of competency and responsibility. A recommendation from the University of Maryland’s teacher education program was to ensure that practicum students and student teachers have the opportunity to work with only the best and most qualified cooperating teachers. New teachers and student teachers need honest feedback and constructive criticism designed to help them assess the effectiveness of their instruction and to make appropriate instructional decisions (Lovingfoss & et al., 2001).

The practicum project should foster the blending of critical thinking, writing and social reflection, and the application of technical skills and methodologies learned and acquired throughout the student’s academic career (Williams, n.d.). Jackson State

(School files) has a conceptual framework for preparing its teacher education majors. Its expected outcomes are to produce responsive educators in six domains: knowledgeable response, skillful response, committed response, professional response, diversity, and technology. From this six-point framework, Table 2 illustrates what is possible when classroom teaching and field experience come together. The bottom line is that the university meets its goal of preparing professionals and the candidate realizes his or her dream of becoming an effective teacher to staff American schools.

Table 2
The Results When Classroom Teaching and Field Experience come Together

Classroom teaching		can impart knowledge about curricular content;
Field experience		can make the curriculum responsive.
Classroom teaching		can delineate skills needed for successful teaching;
Field experience		can display the skills to achieve objectives.
Classroom teaching		can explain the importance of commitment in teaching;
Field experience		can make commitment a reality.
Classroom teaching		can enumerate the criteria for professional competence;
Field experience		can make professional competence a collaborative venue.
Classroom teaching		can highlight procedures for accommodating diversity;
Field experience		can make diversity a beneficial disposition.
Classroom teaching		can ensure the ability to operate teaching technologies;
Field experience		can make technology revolutionize the enterprise.
Classroom teaching and field experience make the curriculum complete;		
Classroom teaching and field experience build competency.		
Classroom teaching and field experience are an awesome two;		
Classroom teaching and field experience make teaching a dream come true.		

Summary and Implications

This manuscript focused on two principal components of teacher preparation, traditional classroom teaching and the clinical experience. To put matters in perspective, attention was called to the need for competent teachers, the job of the college professor, an overview of college teacher education training, the types and potential values of field-based experiences, what some candidates said about their field-based experiences, and what happens when coursework and field experiences come together. From the investigation the following tenets were established

- Qualified teachers are sorely needed to staff American schools;
- Professors are the point persons in the preparation program;
- The four-walls type instruction has its place for developing theoretical and content skills;
- Field-based experience is a “stage” for application of skills and for getting a real-feel for the teaching profession;
- It’s teacher preparation at its best when classroom learning and field experience come together; and
- The proper orchestration of classroom learning and field experience will go a long way toward ensuring highly qualified teachers to educate American students.

Lest professors become too complacent, now may indeed be a fine time for them to ponder the number of hearts that are touched or the number of lives that are changed as a result of the various aspects of their teaching. They may consider just what a well-chosen practicum experience can do to enrich classroom teaching. When done according to specific criteria, classroom teaching builds a sound knowledge base for the discipline and sets the stage for the best practices in the schools. Field-based experience can provide the opportunity to put to use what has been learned in the classroom. The ultimate result can be a better prepared teacher to meet the needs of school children.

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