Best Practices for Designing Practicum in Special Education Programs

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Abstract:

Teacher education programs that prepare teachers within the context of functioning elementary and secondary schools are widely discussed and debated. Research studies show that effective preparation of good teachers includes intensive practical experience with K-12 students under carefully supervised conditions in collaboration with experienced teachers. The field studies/practicum is a compulsory part of the teacher education program. Field studies/practicum in special education programs are dealt with in different ways at different universities. The role of the field studies/practicum in undergraduate and graduate special education programs is very important. What kind of field studies/practicum best prepares prospective special education teachers for classroom practice? Based on real life experience and research, the authors have proposed a reinforced life experience practicum framework, which prepares prospective special education teachers for effective classroom practices.

Key words: Best practices, field studies, practicum, special education, teacher education.

Introduction

There is a shortage of special education teachers in the United States. The supply of qualified special education teachers has been especially low for decades (Nichols, Bicard, Bicard, & Casey, 2008). Approximately 98% of the nation's school districts report special education teacher shortages (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). The demand for special educators is expected to increase by 17% from now through 2018; a rate greater than that which is predicted for all other occupations. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, 2009). Approximately half of the nation's 3.2 million teachers are baby-boomers and one million may retire in the next two years. By 2014, up to a million new teachers will be needed (Duncan, 2009). Such a shortage of teachers is not only a problem in the USA. The organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2009) indicated that finding sufficient numbers of qualified teachers is a problem for all OECD countries. There are several reasons for this shortage, including teacher retirement, teacher attrition, and difficulties in attracting and retaining pre-service teachers (Bruinsma and Jenson, 2010). Teacher education programs that prepare teachers within the context of functioning elementary and secondary schools are widely discussed and debated (Lapan & Minner, 1997). Research studies show that effective preparation of good teachers includes intensive practical experience with K-12 students under carefully supervised conditions in collaboration with experienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Grant & Gibson, 2011).

The field studies/practicum is a compulsory part of the teacher education program. Field studies/practicum in special education programs are dealt with in different ways at different

universities. Field studies/practicum may be integrated into teacher education to greater or lesser extent and even if they overlap, different models can be identified (Mattsson, Eilersttsson, & Rorrison, 2011). These experiences are interspersed between blocks of time devoted to theory-based courses and allow teacher candidates to contextualize their theoretical learning work with real students, teachers, and curriculum in natural settings (Baum, & Korth, 2013; LoCasale-Crouch, Davis, Wiens, & Pianta, 2012). A field studies/practicum is part of the learning sequence that scaffolds the transition to a teaching role and provides the opportunity to link theory and practice (Akhtar, Majeed, & Murtaza, 2013; Retallick, & Miller, 2010). Another researchers stated that constructivist teacher education programs should create field experiences that facilitate the growth of teacher candidates through experiences, reflection, self-examination rather than a positivist program that requires the teacher candidates to assume practices mandated by those in authority and added that field studies/practicum experiences should not only enable teacher candidates to observe teaching as practiced by experienced teachers but also to practice reflectivity (Compton, & Davis, 2010; Craig, 2010; Dangel, 2013; Kunter, Kleickmann, Klusmann, & Richter, 2013).

Special education is based on the hypothesis that each student brings a lifetime of understandings to the field studies/practicum learning process and assumes accountability for optimizing the learning potential of the classroom and field experiences. This conceptualization is known as the adult learner model of education (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Wang, & Cranton, 2013). Along with using their life experiences to motivate themselves to gain further knowledge and enhance skill building, adult learners seek to determine and have control over their own learning (Ibrahim, Freeman, & Shelley, 2012; Merriam, & Bierema, 2013).

The special education field studies/practicum is an excellent opportunity for the students to develop and utilize the adult learner model. By taking responsibility for their own professional growth and development in special education practice, the undergraduate students can explore and deepen their knowledge and skills for future practice as professional in the field of special education. This approach empowers them to build on the strengths previously developed through volunteer/community service, coursework, and other educational experiences. Incorporating undergraduate students' concepts into their field studies/practicum experience will prepare them for future employment, in which they will have to function autonomously and professionally. Also they will serve as effective and qualified professional in the field of special education.

In a recent review of field studies/practicum, researchers (Regehr, Bogo, Donovan, Lim, & Anstice, 2012) report that an optimal field studies/practicum experience includes a supportive field instructor who provides balanced feedback and regular supervision, has appropriate learning activities and role models, and engages in reflection and self-critique. To optimize the field studies/practicum experience, researchers stated that onsite academic assignments, follow-up, and evaluation were essential for a meaningful and educational experience (Averett, Carawan, & Burroughs, 2012; Baum, 2011; Bogo, 2010; Cruickshank, & Westbrook, 2013; Flynn, et al., 2013; Gelman, 2012; Johnson, & Munch, 2010; Maynes, Allison, & Julien-Schultz, 2012; Saltzburg *et al.*, 2010). They have suggested the following guidelines: discuss any questions and concerns; gain information about field studies/practicum sites; observe in-service and pre-service teachers, engage in collaborative learning and peer mentoring. Researchers acknowledged the importance of engaging pre-service teachers in the lives of their students (Anderson, & Stillman, 2013; Garcia, Arias, Murri, & Serna, 2010; Yu, 2011).

The Context of this Paper

The role of the field studies/practicum in undergraduate and graduate special education programs is very important. What kind of field studies/practicum best prepares prospective special education teachers for classroom practice? Based on real life experience and research, the authors have proposed a reinforced life experience practicum framework (figure 1), which prepares prospective special education teachers for effective classroom practices.
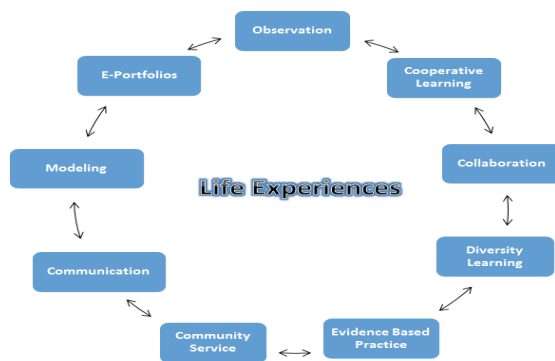

Figure 1: A Reinforced Life Experience Practicum Framework for prospective special education teachers for classroom practices.

Research on training in teacher preparation

Student teaching experiences affect pre-service teachers' development of expertise (Rushton, Lotter, & Singer, 2011; Sleeter, & Owuor, 2011), their perceptions of current school systems and educational practices (Romano, & Gibson, 2006), and affect their interpersonal relationships with mentor teachers and supervisors (Mitchell, Reilly, & Logue, 2009). Researchers (Friedel, Cortina, Turner, & Midgley, 2010) underscored the importance of student teaching and mentioned that a teacher's behaviors, values, beliefs, and ambition to act may be cultivated or inhibited during their early experience as a student teacher.

Learning to teach

From an early age we are surrounded by teaching, most primarily by parents and educators. These early experiences with authority figures help shape teachers' pedagogical tendencies (Biggs, 2011; Nilsson, & Loughren, 2012; Tigchelaar, Brouwer, & Vermunt, 2010). Teachers are supposed to lay an intellectual and practical foundation for teaching in education courses and field experiences (Darling-Hammond, 2012; Zeichner, 2010). Many teachers reported that their pre-service program did not prepare them for teaching, and a variety of research using both surveys and case methods documents the limited impact of teacher education on prospective teachers' perspectives and beliefs (Gay, 2010; Sang, Valcke, Braak, & Tondeur, 2010; Zeichner, 2010). At the same time, we have some evidence that powerful and innovative teacher preparation can affect the way teachers think about teaching and learning, students and subject matter (Bakkenes, Vermunt, & Wubbels, 2010; Briggs, John, & Tang, 2011). No matter how much students can learn during their teacher preparation program, learning teaching inevitably occurs on the job site. No one learns to teach in their initial year with perfection. Efforts to describe the phases teachers go through in learning to teach through generally posit an initial stage of survival and discovery, a second stage of experimentation and consolidation, and a third stage of mastery and stabilization (Bensalah, Olivier, & Stefaniak, 2012; Eros, 2013; Eros, 2011; Hill, 2013; Miller, 2012; Rumbaugh, King, Beran, Washburn, & Gould, 2012).

Field experience

At the undergraduate or graduate level, field studies/practicum programs include field studies/practicum experiences that last for a semester/term and involve considerable time in the

classroom/field sites. Pre-service programs with the most intense field components (Grieco, 2011; O'Neill, & Stephenson, 2012) required early field experiences, one or two practicum experiences, and a semester- or year-long student teaching placement. Programs with such extensive field experiences recognized the developmental nature of teaching (Nilsson, 2012; Slattery, 2012). Researchers state that practice should be sufficiently extensive and intensive for candidates to demonstrate proficiencies in the professional roles for which they are preparing (Al-Musawi, Karam; 2011; Papanastasiou, Tatto, & Neophytou, 2012). Following this guideline, most United States teacher education programs require one term/semester of student teaching (Cummings & Bernard, 2010; Rodgers, & Jenkins, 2010; Cuenca, Schmeichel, Butler, Dinkelman, & Nichols 2011: NCTQ, 2011). Dreyer (1998) summarizes this by noting, when initial teacher training students spend more of their training time in schools they get the opportunity to integrate theory of Education with that which they are experiencing at first hand (Quick, & Siebörger, 2005; Reddy, Menkveld, & Bitzer, 2008). At the field studies/practicum sites, the students will be supervised by the certified special education professionals/cooperating teachers and monitored by the University faculty. The faculty mentioned careful supervision as an important feature of their programs (Beck, & Kosnik, 2002; Brownell, Ross, Colón, & McCallum, 2005; Yeh, & Singh, 2014; Singh, Yeh, Das, Heo, Verma, 2014; Zeichner, & McDonald, 2011). Most of the university faculty members continuously incorporate input from cooperating teachers and use their own direct assessments of student performance to determine if students have met expected standards of performance.

Diversity learning
Pre-service teachers' attitudes towards diverse learners can greatly affect student success and achievement in the classroom

setting and it is imperative that undergraduate programs provide courses and relevant experiences that prepare their pre-service teachers to interact with and have a positive effect on diverse learners (Brown, Barkley, & Higginbotham, 2011; Thomas, Hassaram, Rieth, Raghavan, Kinzer, & Mulloy, 2012). As increased numbers of diverse learners enter the classroom, the need for experiences that educate pre-service teachers on the learning needs of these students is imperative (Anderson, & Stillman, 2013; Doorn, & Schumm, 2013; Gomez, Strage, Knutson-Miller, & Garcia-Nevarez, 2009). Many pre-service teachers enter in the field of special education with fixed philosophies about teaching and learning that may not be correct or applicable to all teaching situations. Researchers in education highly recommend that teacher education institutions/universities offer field experiences, as well as courses focused on teaching diverse learners (Fenwick, & Cooper, 2013; Ryan, Carrington, Selva, & Healy, 2009; Scott, 2011).

Promising practices in field studies/practicum

Across several studies in few decades, one theme that emerges is that field experiences lead to more significant learning when activities are focused and well structured (Biggs, & Tang, 2011; Brophy, 2010; Paechter, Maier, & Macher, 2010). Cooperating teachers have a powerful influence on the nature of the student teaching experience (Chen, 2010; Kopcha, & Alger, 2014). So cooperative learning (CL) is the crucial factor. CL is instruction that involves students working in teams to accomplish a common goal, under conditions that include the following five essential elements (Gillies, & Boyle, 2010; Slavin, 2011):

I.   *Positive interdependence.* Team members are obliged to rely on one another to achieve the goal. If any team members fail to do their part, everyone suffers consequences (Nam, & Zellner, 2011).

II. *Individual accountability.* All students in a group are held accountable for doing their share of the work and for mastery of all of the material to be learned (Dyson, Linehan, & Hastie, 2010; Verma, & Singh, 2014).

III. *Face-to-face promote interaction.* Although some of the group work may be distributed out and done individually, some must be done interactively, with group members providing one another with feedback, challenging one another's conclusions and reasoning, and perhaps most importantly, teaching and encouraging one another (AbuSeileek, 2012; Kyndt, Raes, Lismont, Timmers, Cascallar, & Dochy, 2013).

IV. *Appropriate use of collaborative skills.* Students are encouraged and helped to develop and practice trust-building, leadership, decision-making, communication, and conflict management skills (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2012; Palloff, & Pratt, 2010).

V. *Group processing.* Team members set group goals, periodically assess what they are doing well as a team, and identify changes they will make to function more effectively in the future (Bender, 2012; Jonassen, & Grabowski, 2012).

Factors involved in student teaching

There are several factors involved in student teaching. Most important is the student teaching experiences during their field practicum. The student teaching experience is based on social cognitive, self-efficacy theories and environmental factors (Cakiroglu, Capa-Aydin, & Hoy, 2012; Das, Gichuru, & Singh, 2013; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Lent, Nota, Soresi, Ginevra, Duffy, & Brown, 2011; McKerlich, Riis, Anderson, & Eastman, 2011; Singh, 2014; Van Dinther, Dochy, & Segers, 2011). The following factors may be

related to student teaching. The quality of teaching depends on these two factors.
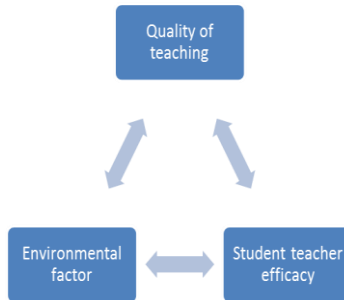
I.   *Environmental factors*

The environment influences how student teachers evaluate their abilities to teach (Houts, Caspi, Pianta, Arseneault, & Moffitt, 2010; Skaalvik, & Skaalvik, 2010). Shaping the environment may encourage behavior change. This may include providing opportunities for behavioral change, assisting with those changes, and offering social support. It is important to recognize environmental constraints that might deter behavior change (Greenfield, 2011; Stern, 2011; Timberlake, 2012).

II.   *Student teacher efficacy*

People possess beliefs, values, cultural resources, and experiences that mediate their cognitive processing of five fundamental human capabilities; people make sense of their experiences, explore their cognitions and self-beliefs, evaluate themselves, and alter their thinking and behavior through self-reflection (Gay, & Kirkland, 2003; Nilsen, & Ellström, 2012; Roberts, Kellough, & Moore, 2011; Singh, & Squires, 2014). Researchers believe that one's own perceptions of efficacy derived from self-reflection are the most powerful of the five fundamental human   capabilities (Caprara, Vecchione, Alessandri, Gerbino, & Barbaranelli, 2011; Das, & Singh, 2013; Maddux, 2011). Teacher's sense of efficacy is an important variable in teacher development and how teachers teach (Collie,

Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Ghanizadeh, & Moafian, 2011; Tschannen-Moran, & Johnson, 2011; Yeh, & Singh, 2014). Teacher's sense of efficacy has been shown to be a powerful construct related to student outcomes such as achievement, motivation, and self-efficacy (Duffin, French, & Patrick, 2012; Tuchman, & Isaacs, 2011). Furthermore, teachers' sense of efficacy was related to teachers' behavior, effort, goals, aspiration, openness to new ideas, innovation, planning and organization, persistence, resilience, reluctance to use criticism, enthusiasm, willingness to work with difficult students, and commitment to teaching and their careers (Akbari, & Tavassoli, 2011; Ciyer, Nagasawa, Swadener, & Patet, 2010; Tweed, 2013).

E-portfolios

Electronic portfolios have become common in institutions and/or in the universities of higher education that aspire to earn national accreditation and need to collect data analytically in an electronic assessment system (Anderson, Sheng, & Sweet, 2010; Chien & Rad, 2013; Honigsfeld, Giouroukakis, Cohan, & Walsh, 2009). Mentors in the universities are able to analyze each dimension of each rubric for areas of strength and weakness, and students may also elect to archive and expand their e-portfolios into personal/ professional Web spaces (Richardson, 2010; Von Konsky, & Oliver, 2012; Welikala, 2012). In regard to the latter, teacher candidates are given the opportunity to self-analyze and reflect on their academic growth as they select pieces to include in their e-portfolios that represent who they are as individuals and as professionals entering the field of teaching (Levin, He, & Allen, 2013; Martin, & Siry, 2012; Minutella, 2012).

Discussion board

Instructors, authors have included a discussion board for instructional purposes in their classroom. They found that the discussion board incorporates the characteristics of authentic learning tasks, such as student interaction for the purposes of sharing their thoughts, relating their ideas to past experiences, collaborating with their peers, actively constructing their own meaning, and incorporating the diverse perspectives of others (Chartrand, 2012; Woo, Herrington, Agostinho, & Reeves, 2007; Ribbe, & Bezanilla, 2013).

Creating a link between teaching and research

University faculty members can help educators and administrators, districts, and states respond to changing expectations for highly competent, caring educators and systematically monitor school, classroom, and student progress and performance in order to know precisely what works to increase student learning in the classroom and promote evidence based practices. The emphasis on research productivity in the faculty incentive and reward system is often justified by the claim that research enhances teaching (Borrego, Cutler, Froyd, Prince, & Henderson, 2011; Prince, Felder, and Brent, 2007).

Approaches to teaching and learning vary between individuals and departments as much as between disciplines and many staff members still practice a primarily transmission model of teaching, especially in lectures (Biggs, & Tang, 2011; Dent, & Harden, 2013; Falchikov, 2013). However, special education students are increasingly experiencing a wide range of types of active learning, including inquiry-based learning, discussion groups, role plays, and computer-based learning. Students commonly experience active learning in the special education classrooms through field work, and practical work,

but active learning may be integrated into all forms of teaching (Gulliford, & Upton, 2013; Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, & Basom, 2011; Whalley, & Favis-Mortlock, 2011).

Collaboration

Collaboration means educators planning and working together in the schools with cooperating professionals and working with students at all stages of schooling and across all learning areas. Traditionally, different schools and universities have worked together to prepare pre-service special education teachers for the classroom. In a common scenario, a university supervisor contacts different schools and arranges field studies/student teaching placement, hoping all the while the teacher accepting the placement will be reasonably good (El-Kerdany, 2012; Henriksen, 2011; Rossetti, & Yeager, 2013; Schocker, Croft, Licwinko, Muthersbaugh, Trout, 2010). Meaningfully and effectively training pre-service teachers cannot happen at the college/university level only and must be a shared enterprise with public and private schools (Clark, 2013; Crawford, O'Reilly, & Flanagan, 2012; Forlin, 2010). Schools need high quality teachers, and universities strive to provide programs which will develop them. Student teacher should meet with their university field studies/practicum supervisor prior to student teaching to outline the procedures. The university supervisor should observe the student teacher during the field experience and discuss what he/she observed during the student teacher's teaching, and the university supervisor should also provide the student teacher with a copy of the evaluation so reflection and changes can be made, as needed (Marzano, & Toth, 2013; Nolan, & Hoover, 2011; Ronfeldt, 2012). Effective mentoring is a difficult and demanding task and teachers performing the role need the time and in-service support appropriate to the increased responsibilities being placed on them (Bullough, 2012; Seldin, Miller, & Seldin, 2010;

Singh, Prem, & Sai, 1999). NCATE (2002) requires: "The unit and school partners collaboratively design and implement field experiences and clinical practice, including the assessment of candidate performance. The school and the university faculty share the responsibility for candidate learning. The partners share and integrate resources and expertise to create roles and structures that support and create opportunities for candidates to learn". As relationships between schools and universities grow and become more and more symbiotic, pre-service teachers engage in continuously improving levels of structured, well-defined, and implemented experiences (Alger, 2006; Bernshausen & McMahan, 2011; Goodlad, 2004; Heath, 2005; Shoffner, 2008). Brownell, *et al* (2005) emphasized collaboration in different ways that included: (a) knowledge of collaborative skills, (b) faculty-to-faculty collaboration, (c) school-to-faculty collaboration, and (d) use of student cohorts.

Conclusion

The role of a reinforced life experience practicum framework for prospective special education teachers for classroom practices was discussed in this paper. Conceptual framework that research has shown to be effective for prospective special education teachers was also discussed. The role of the field studies/practicum is very important in special education programs. This paper examines the theoretical and conceptual framework for effective field studies/practicum, which prepares prospective special education teachers for classroom practices. This paper proposed a reinforced life experience practicum framework for prospective special education teachers for classroom practices, which includes; collaboration, creating link between teaching and research, discussion board, promising practices in field studies/practicum, diversity training, research on training in teacher preparation, field experiences, learning to teach, factors involved in student teaching, and e-portfolio.

The current findings should be considered in light of solitary limitation; in person/phone/survey research and/or discussion might have been conducted. Further research is needed to determine what kind of field studies/practicum best prepares prospective special education teachers for effective classroom practices.

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