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Dana Harwell

Jenifer Moore

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Issues of Concern Related to Practicum Experiences in Undergraduate Education Programs

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Author(s): [Dana Harwell](#) and [Jenifer Moore](#)

Introduction

In many undergraduate education programs, practicum experiences (also referred to as field experiences or lab placements) are an integral component of the curriculum. These placements are designed to provide undergraduate students with practical, authentic experience in classrooms of various levels. During practicum experiences, students are placed in classrooms in order to gain direct experience in teaching elementary or secondary students. However, because these clinical applications occur in real-world learning environments, many factors can influence their quality and effectiveness.

Preservice teachers have identified several concerns including the implementation of managerial and instructional practices, assuming the role of instructional leader, and undergoing evaluations (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999). Additionally, recent research has indicated that practicum teachers are concerned with expectations of university supervisors, cooperating teachers, and the professional development schools with which they are affiliated (Woods & Weasmer, 2003). Previous research suggests that practicum experiences can be enhanced when the concerns of teacher candidates are addressed and acknowledged (Power & Bogo, 2002; Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999; Talvitie, Peltokallio, & Mannisto, 2000). Johnston (1993) emphasized the need to evaluate the issues related to practicum experiences and provided suggestions for improvement of these vital, authentic learning opportunities.

Related Research

In this study, undergraduate education students were surveyed to determine the issues of concern related to practicum experiences of these teacher candidates. Three lines of research guided the inquiry: research focusing on the specific concerns of undergraduate education students, studies emphasizing the effect of interactions with the cooperating teacher and university supervisor on the efficacy of the practicum experience, and inquiries exploring the effects of the expectations of the cooperating teacher on the practicum experience.

Specific Concerns of Teacher Candidates

The first line of research indicates that preservice teachers are concerned with many aspects involved with practicum experiences; including instructional proficiency, uncertainty about their exact function in the classroom, and fear of evaluation. The following studies substantiate these concerns.

Research conducted by Kyriacou & Stephens (1999) identified nine major areas of concern pertaining to the practicum experiences of teacher candidates. Information for this qualitative study was gained through focus group interviews conducted with 13 undergraduate education students preparing to teach English or History. The first topic of concern involved whether or not the teacher candidates would be considered and treated as “real” teachers by the students and faculty (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999, p.22). Kyriacou & Stephens identified the following four aspects as contributors to this concern: dissatisfaction with assuming observatory rather than participatory roles, providing assistance to the classroom teacher with menial rather than instructional tasks, indecision concerning whether or not to emulate the instructional/managerial conduct of the classroom teacher, and fear of being unconsciously undermined by the classroom teacher through interruptions during instructional activities. The next topics of concern (assuming the role of disciplinarian and handling unruly behavior) suggest the apprehension felt by teacher candidates about successfully managing students’ behavior. Other elements that tend to cause distress are issues related to planning and instruction. According to Kyriacou & Stephens (1999), the participants specified concerns involving difficulty with devising, organizing, and completing all planned activities, demonstrating proficient pedagogical skills, fulfilling various duties associated with teaching, and feeling unprepared by their university programs for real-world instruction. Finally, teacher candidates evidenced anxiety over the evaluation process. Many participants voiced concern about being assessed by their university supervisors and/or cooperating teachers, but indicated that the feedback they received was valuable.

Capel (1997) administered a questionnaire to determine the changes in concerns experienced by first and second year students participating in practicum teaching experiences in an undergraduate physical education program. The questionnaire was comprised of items included on both the Student Teacher Anxiety Scale and the Teacher Concerns Questionnaire. Results indicated that after each administration of the questionnaire, the most stressful events in the experience were observations and evaluations conducted by university supervisors. The least worrisome events involved general interactions with school staff. These phenomena remained constant through the first and second practicum experiences.

Piggf & Marso (1987) conducted a study to examine changes in the anxiety experienced by preservice teachers during field placements. Three groups of students were targeted for this study. The first group consisted of students enrolled in the first required education course involving a practicum experience. The next group was comprised of students about to enter the student teaching internship, and the third group was made up of students that had recently completed student teaching. The researchers administered The Teacher Concerns Questionnaire, The Attitude Toward Teaching as a Career Scale, and The Teaching Anxiety Scale. In addition to these, subjects completed a questionnaire requesting information about their assurance of the decision to teach and their anticipated effectiveness as a teacher. Overall, the attitudes toward teaching did not change over time. The female elementary education majors reported the most optimistic attitudes toward teaching. The most positive results came from those that had made the decision to teach during their elementary school years as opposed to later in life. This remained consistent regardless of experience level. The anxiety-about-teaching scores indicated a waning trend over the designated check points. Overall concern about teaching tended to increase just prior to student teaching and then return to a lower level after completion of the program. As for the confidence in teaching as a career choice, there was an upward trend over the course of the three checkpoints.

Kozar & Marcketti (2008) conducted a study with the purpose of determining the value of field-based instruction and how this approach impacts student learning outcomes. Active learning on the part of the teacher candidates in the form of field experiences was a main focus in the study. Undergraduate teacher candidates at 4-year institutions participated in 2 field-based courses. It was noted that the teacher candidates gleaned problem solving skills as they applied the theory in real-world situations. The authors specify the necessity to conduct the experience in a well-organized, strategic manner. This format allows for greater student learning outcomes.

Interactions with the Cooperating Teacher and University Supervisor

Smoot (2003) conducted a longitudinal study in which a questionnaire was administered to preservice teachers in a field-based teacher education program at Georgia College and State University each year from 1999-2002. Results of the 1999-2000 questionnaire indicated that 86% of preservice teachers rated the teaching effectiveness of their cooperating teachers as good or excellent. From year to year, 70% of the respondents indicated that they would recommend the host teacher to others. In the 2001-2002 evaluations, the participants indicated that the various qualities held by the host teachers ranged from 89% positive in communication skills to a technology use rating of 51% positive. There was a positive trend over the years in regard to the collaborative partnerships or team teaching of the cooperating teachers. This research emphasized the critical role of cooperating teachers.

According to Hickcox (2002), the use of field-based, experiential learning causes teacher candidates to become actively involved in the teaching-learning process. There is also a sense of tailoring the experience to the needs of the particular teacher candidate. This comes through close contact, consultation, and open dialogue among the university faculty, cooperating teacher, and teacher candidate. The research of Chalias, Ria, Bertone, Trohel, & Durand (2004) reinforces the importance of the relationship involving the preservice teacher and the cooperating teacher. This qualitative study, conducted with three dyads, each comprised of one preservice teacher and one cooperating teacher, focused upon the considerable impact of the interactions within these dyads on the pedagogical learning of the preservice teachers. The researchers conducted observations of the preservice teachers during lessons and the post-lesson interviews that followed. The findings of this study indicated that the quality of the interactions improved over time, moving from superficial discussion to meaningful dialogue. The researchers attributed this initial lack of substance to the variances in professional experiences and inconsistencies in knowledge pertaining to instructional practice. Additionally, the findings indicated that the interactions serve as learning experiences for preservice and cooperating teachers. Finally, the research of Chalias et al. (2004) suggested that optimal learning for preservice teachers occurs when the communications with cooperating teachers consist of both discourse and rumination.

Anderson (2007) conducted a study to determine the influence of cooperating teachers during a field experience. Ninety-eight teacher candidates and cooperating teachers participated by completing questionnaires, an inventory to measure teaching perspectives, and interviews. The specific topics investigated from the teacher candidates' perspective include the type and degree of power held by the cooperating teacher, the consequences of mentors also being involved in the evaluation process, modeling by the cooperating teachers, and the relationship between the two entities. The cooperating teachers provided feedback regarding nurturing the teacher candidates, evaluation, and mentoring. Teacher candidates frequently expressed a desire for the cooperating teacher to model effective

teacher qualities. They also anxiety concerning the evaluation by the cooperating teacher, and the link to conforming to the cooperating teacher's ways was influenced by the power of the evaluation. Additionally, the study revealed that cooperating teachers feel responsible for mentoring, providing feedback to, and guiding teacher candidates while maintaining a sense of allowing them to have some autonomy in their teaching style. It often becomes a delicate juggling act to maintain a mentor/mentee relationship and an evaluator.

Expectations of the Cooperating Teacher

Although interactions with cooperating teachers and university supervisors are integral to the quality of the practicum experiences, expectations of cooperating teachers and the manner in which they are conveyed to teacher candidates can affect the efficacy of practicum experiences as well. The research of Woods & Weasmer (2003) highlighted the importance of establishing open and clear channels of communication between teacher candidates and cooperating teachers. The authors indicated that preservice teachers interact exceedingly more with cooperating teachers than with university supervisors. Therefore, it is especially imperative that these communications are beneficial and supportive. During this study, 28 public school teachers completed demographic surveys and participated in 20-30 minute interviews with the researchers. Specifically, based on the findings of this research, cooperating teachers expected teacher candidates to function as exemplary role models for students, develop empathetic, caring relationships with the students, cultivate a passion for education, create constructive relationships with parents and guardians, exhibit professional behavior at all times, and demonstrate flexibility (Woods & Weasmer, 2003).

Teacher candidates are concerned about various elements related to the practicum experience including: instructional abilities, disciplinary issues, their roles in the classroom, and evaluation. Additionally, interactions with the cooperating teacher and university supervisor are integral to the efficacy of the practicum experience. Furthermore, the quality of communication with the cooperating teacher, especially concerning the expectations related to the practicum experience, influences the general effectiveness of the placement as well.

This study was conducted to identify issues of concern pertaining to undergraduate practicum experiences. The following research questions were addressed: (1) What are the specific concerns of teacher candidates related to instructional and management practices? (2) Do the interactions with cooperating teachers and university supervisors have an impact on the efficacy of the practicum experience as a means of preparing the teacher candidate for her own classroom? (3) Do the expectations of the cooperating teacher affect the quality of the practicum experience?

Method

Sample

The participants were undergraduate education students enrolled in a reading course, an early childhood course and a middle grades education course at a university in the United States.

The student body of classes was comprised of 81% Caucasian and 17.7% African-American. The gender composition of the sample was 79.7% female and 16.5 % male, with two participants providing invalid responses. The majority of the participants (59.5 %) classified themselves in the 20-29 age

category, with 21.5% of participants in the 30-39 age group, 13.9% of participants in the 40-49 age category, and 2.5% of participants in the 50-59 age group. Most of the participants (70.9%) classified themselves as “Seniors” while the remaining 25.3% categorized themselves as “Juniors”.

Nature of Practicum Experiences

The research of Woods & Weasmer (2003) indicated that in America, each state requires teacher candidates to successfully complete practicum experiences during the course of teacher education programs. Specifically, the undergraduate major program of study at the participating university requires over 130 hours of practicum experiences, not counting the student teaching internship. Each of the courses in which the participants are enrolled requires 20-25 field placement hours.

During the practicum, students are expected to plan and implement 2-3 lessons for small and whole group instruction, tutor individual students with special needs, and collaborate with the cooperating teacher for guidance with instructional and managerial duties. Each student is required to demonstrate instructional, planning, and management methods conducive to optimal learning. The students are evaluated by the cooperating teachers using an instrument created by a committee of university supervisors.

Survey Instrument

The survey was submitted to a member of the university’s institutional review board for approval in June of 2005 and approval to continue with the research was granted. Approximately two weeks later, the survey was administered during the latter portion of three undergraduate education courses requiring practicum experiences. The survey, which required about 15 minutes to complete, contained questions related to the general concerns of the students associated with practicum experiences, the quality of the interactions with cooperating teachers and university supervisors, and the expectations of the cooperating teachers (see Appendix 1).

The chief goal of the survey was to determine the specific concerns associated with teacher candidates of undergraduate education programs. The items comprising the categories were created based upon previous research (Kyriacou & Stephens, 1999; Woods & Weasmer, 2003; Power & Bogo, 2002; Talvitie, Peltokallio, & Mannisto, 2000; and Johnson, 1993).

The following four-point scale was devised and used with 21 of the 25 survey items: (4) strongly agree, (3) agree, (2) disagree, and (1) agree. For item 22, participants were asked to indicate their age with the following ranges: (1) 20-29 (2) 30-29 (3) 40-49 and (4) 50-59. To complete items 23 and 24, participants indicated their gender (1) Female and (2) Male and classification (Junior or Senior). Finally, item 25 asked the participants to indicate their race (1) Caucasian (2) African-American (3) Hispanic and (4) Asian/Pacific Islander. No other races were represented in the sample group.

Data Analysis

An analysis of the descriptive statistics was conducted to determine the relationship between the sets of questions included on the survey questionnaire. For this analysis, each of following variables were coded according to the following four-point scale: (4) strongly agree, (3) agree, (2) disagree, and (1) strongly disagree.

Items

The following items were included on the survey instrument:

- My cooperating teacher gave constructive criticism that helped me gain a better understanding of the teaching process.
- My cooperating teacher provided useful guidance prior to my teaching a lesson.
- I felt comfortable discussing any problems with my university supervisor that might have arisen during the practicum experience.
- My cooperating teacher provided opportunities for me to expand my knowledge base by allowing me to experience a variety of instructional situations and work with diverse groups of students.
- My cooperating teacher made clear to me her expectations of me during the practicum experience.
- I feel that my cooperating teacher and I shared similar expectations of the information I would gain from the practicum experience.
- My cooperating teacher felt that it was important for me to develop a love of teaching.
- My cooperating teacher felt that it was important for me to build rapport with parents and caregivers.
- My university supervisor often offered helpful advice relative to my individual practicum experience.
- Overall, I feel the practicum experience has been a beneficial component in my education.
- My university supervisor offered helpful suggestions related specifically to instructional or methodological issues.
- My cooperating teacher felt that it was important for me to demonstrate professionalism at all times.
- My practicum experience required more work in general than I expected.
- During my practicum experience, I have experienced self-doubt.
- I learned a lot by observing and talking to other teachers during my practicum.
- I feel as though I have been under a great deal of pressure during my practicum experience.
- My practicum experience was different than what I expected.
- I feel comfortable being observed by the cooperating teacher or university supervisor.
- My views toward teaching have changed as a result of my practicum experience.
- I feel I am more prepared to hold a teaching position after my practicum experience.
- I was able to discipline my class easily during my practicum.

Results

Regarding the first line of research, the majority of the participants reported (60.7 %) that the practicum experience was different than they had expected. Additionally, 58.2% of the participants indicated that the workload associated with the practicum experience involved more effort than they originally anticipated. Finally, over half of the participants (59.4%) reported experiencing feeling a great deal of pressure during their practicum placements.

However, several elements pertaining to the practicum experience were also identified. First, nearly all (96.2%) of the participants revealed that they had learned a great deal as a result of conversations with and observations of their practicum teachers. Second, 73.4% of the participants' responses reported that they implemented disciplinary practices with relative ease. Third, 82.2% of the teacher candidates indicated that they felt confident during classroom observations conducted by the cooperating teacher or the university supervisor. Finally, the majority (89.9%) of the respondents reported that the practicum experience had helped them become more prepared for independent classroom instruction.

However, the answer totals from two of the survey questions included in this section yielded inconclusive results. The participants' responses were divided nearly evenly when asked whether or not they had experienced feelings of self-doubt during the practicum experience (43.1% disagree; 56.9% agree). Additionally, when asked if their views pertaining to teaching had changed as a result of the practicum experience, participants responded in the following nearly equal proportions: 43% disagree; 56.9% agree.

The second line of research involved the impact of interactions with cooperating teachers and university supervisors on the efficacy of the practicum experience as a means of preparing the teacher candidate for her own classroom. Responses to these survey items revealed the following information pertaining to cooperating teachers. Overall, most of the teacher candidates indicated that the constructive criticism offered by the cooperating teacher prior to the instructional activity (81%) and after the lesson was completed (79.8%) was beneficial. Similarly, the vast majority of participants indicated that their university supervisors had offered practical advice relating to general (78.5 %) and instructional topics (86.1 %) during the practicum experience.

Singular to the impact of the cooperating teacher, 81 % of the participants reported that the cooperating teachers provided opportunities for them to experience a variety of instructional situations and work with a diverse student population. Conversely, regarding only the university supervisor, the majority of participants (87.3%) agreed that they felt comfortable discussing problems associated with the practicum experience with these individuals.

Finally, the third line of research explored the manner in which the expectations of the cooperating teacher affected the quality of the practicum experience. The majority of participants' responses (84.8 %) signified that overall, their expectations of the knowledge they would gain from the practicum experience and those of the cooperating teacher were similar. Additionally, 82.3% of the participants reported that the cooperating teachers communicated these expectations clearly. Moreover, the vast majority of respondents (92.4%) indicated that they felt that the cooperating teacher communicated the importance of developing a love of teaching. Similarly, 81% of the participants believed that their cooperating teachers successfully conveyed the critical nature of establishing rapport with parents and caregivers. Finally, 93.6% of participants stated that their cooperating teachers communicated the

significant impact of maintaining and exhibiting professionalism at all times.

Discussion

Summary of and Interpretation of Findings

The purposes of this study were to (1) ascertain the specific concerns of teacher candidates related to instructional and management practices, (2) identify the effects of the interactions with cooperating teachers and university supervisors on the efficacy of the practicum experiences, and (3) determine if the expectations of cooperating teachers affect the quality of the practicum experience.

The variables pertaining to the inconsistencies in the actual and expected practicum experience, the amount of work, and the pressure felt during the practicum experience were identified as areas of concern. This information indicates that teacher candidates seem to be most concerned about their ability to perform successfully in the practicum experience and have unrealistic or inaccurate expectations of the practicum experience. Additionally, the variables associated with observations of and interactions with cooperating teachers, constructive criticism related to lessons and instructional strategies and opportunities to work with diverse student populations provided by cooperating teachers, successful implementation of the existing discipline system, comfort levels during observations conducted by the cooperating teacher and university supervisor, and the overall value of the practicum experience were identified as areas of strength. This information signifies the critical nature of the cooperating teacher during the practicum experience.

Implications

It is critical for cooperating teachers and university supervisors to acknowledge and address the concerns of teacher candidates actual and expected practicum experience, the amount of work, and the pressure felt during the practicum experience in order to promote positive practicum experiences. Teacher educators should also communicate honestly with teacher candidates with regard to the actualities of educational settings. In addition, it is vital that university supervisors provide cooperating teachers at participating professional development schools with appropriate information before teacher candidates begin field placements, related to the critical influence of open and honest communication.

Limitations of the Data

The sample was obtained by means of convenience, as one of the researchers is an instructor at the university. Therefore, because the sample was not chosen at random, the female, Caucasian, 20-29 age range is over-represented. Additionally, the data gathered during this research is cross-sectional, and represents one period of time.

Further Research

Throughout the course of the research, several additional topics to guide further research were identified. Nearly half of the participants indicated that they experienced feelings of self-doubt during the practicum experience. Therefore, it is recommended that additional research be conducted to determine the exact educational elements that cause students to experience feelings of self-doubt. Additionally, nearly one-quarter of the respondents indicated that their cooperating teachers did not

offer constructive criticism. Supplemental inquiry should be carried out to determine the barriers to communication between teacher candidates and cooperating teachers. Furthermore, nearly half of the respondents reported that they felt great pressure during their practicum experience. Studies to identify the elements contributing to these feelings should be undertaken. Finally, almost half of the participants indicated that their views toward teaching changed as a result of the practicum experience. It is suggested that the nature of these changes in viewpoints are investigated.

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Appendix 1

Survey Questions

Based upon your experiences during the practicum experience (including communication with your university supervisor and cooperating teacher), please answer the following questions.

1. My practicum experience was different than what I expected it to be.

SA A D SD

2. My practicum experience required more work in general than I expected.

SA A D SD

3. During my practicum experience, I have experienced self-doubt.

SA A D SD

4. I feel as though I have been under a great deal of pressure during my practicum experience.

SA A D SD

5. I learned a lot by observing and talking to other teachers during my practicum.

SA A D SD

6. I was able to discipline my class easily during my practicum.

SA A D SD

7. I feel comfortable being observed by the cooperating teacher or university supervisor.

SA A D SD

8. My views toward teaching have changed as a result of my practicum experience.

SA A D SD

9. I feel I am more prepared to hold a teaching position after my practicum experience.

SA A D SD

10. My cooperating teacher gave constructive criticism after I worked with students that helped me gain a better understanding of the teaching process.

SA A D SD

11. My cooperating teacher provided useful guidance prior to my teaching a lesson.

SA A D SD

12. My cooperating teacher provided opportunities for me to expand my knowledge base by allowing me to experience a variety of instructional situations and work with diverse groups of students.

SA A D SD

13. Overall, I feel the practicum experience has been a beneficial component in my education.

SA A D SD

14. My cooperating teacher made clear to me her expectations of me during the practicum experience.

SA A D SD

15. I feel that my cooperating teacher and I shared similar expectations of the information I would gain from the practicum experience.

SA A D SD

16. My cooperating teacher felt that it was important for me to develop a love of teaching.

SA A D SD

17. My cooperating teacher felt that it was important for me to build rapport with parents and caregivers.

SA A D SD

18. My cooperating teacher felt that it was important for me to demonstrate professionalism at all times.

SA A D SD

19. My university supervisor often offered helpful advice relative to my individual practicum experience.

SA A D SD

20. I felt comfortable discussing any problems that might have arisen during the practicum experience.

SA A D SD

21. My university supervisor offered helpful suggestions related specifically to instructional or methodological issues.

SA A D SD

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