

Chapter 20

Four Perspectives on the Benefits of an Early Field Experience for High School Teacher Candidates: Connecting Theory and Practice

Christine Lotter

University of South Carolina, USA

Kimberly Smoak

Dutch Fork High School, USA

William Roy Blakeney

Dreher High School, USA

Stacey Plotner

University of South Carolina, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter describes an innovative early field experience course for secondary teacher candidates that is held onsite at two local high schools. The chapter presents the course experience from the perspective of three stakeholders involved in the teaching and planning of the experiences: the university faculty instructor, a school administrator, and a practicum high school teacher. University candidate voices are also included through an analysis of survey data collected at the end of the most recent course offering. Each stakeholder describes both the tensions and benefits of the partnership and course experiences. By connecting theory and practice through interactions with all stakeholders during the course, the experience honors the expertise of all involved and builds a community of educators working together to improve secondary teacher education.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-6249-8.ch020

INTRODUCTION

Teacher education programs often strive to provide a balance of practical education experiences with theoretical knowledge. Early field experiences which place university students in P-12 schools to observe and gain teaching experience before student teaching are an important part of the transition of teacher candidates (individuals enrolled in a teacher preparation program) to full time teachers. However, these field experiences often remain disconnected from academic coursework and lead to even greater disconnects or a continuation of the status quo (Bullough, Burrell, Young, Clark, Erickson, & Earle, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2009). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) 2010 report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning outlines a vision for teacher education that puts “practice at the center of teaching preparation” and calls for Universities and school district partners to work together to transform education through ten design principles (p. 2). These design principles emphasize P-12 student learning and clinical practice that provides teacher candidates with opportunities for mentorship and feedback using student learning data. The NCATE report also calls for an integration of content, pedagogy and field experiences. Some urban school districts have moved teacher preparation under their control, working with University programs through teacher residency programs that integrate teacher preparation with on the job training through paid yearlong residencies that are showing some positive influence on student achievement (Papay, West, Fullerton, & Kane, 2011) as well as teacher retention (Berry, Montgomery, Curtis, Hernandez, Wurtzel, & Snyder, 2008; Solomon, 2009).

Without current funding for teacher residency programs, our University teacher preparation programs have instead worked to move teacher preparation coursework into local schools. This chapter describes an early field experience course that works to connect the academic and field components of the teacher education experience through a school-based course that was designed through a partnership between University-based teacher educators, school administration, and classroom mentor teachers (AACTE, 2017). Onsite school-based experiences such as the one described in this chapter are often referred to as “hybrid” or “third spaces” that create stronger connections between academia, P-12 schools, and local communities to improve teacher education (AACTE, 2017; Bhabba, 1990; Lee, 2018; Zeichner, 2010; Zeichner, Payne, & Brayko, 2015). Zeichner (2010) states, “Creating third spaces in teacher education involves an equal and more dialectical relationship between academic and practitioner knowledge in support of student teacher learning” (p. 92). Building partnerships that value and learn from the expertise of all stakeholders engaged in these spaces is often difficult due to University and school constraints (Bullough, Draper, Smith & Burrell, 2004; Labaree, 2004) but necessary to prepare the next generation of teachers to successfully teach all students in diverse settings (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009; Zeichner, 2010).

Welsh and Schaffer (2017) describe how early field experiences can improve candidates instructional strategies and classroom management skills and deepen their focus on student learning through interactions with P-12 students and practicing teachers. Field experiences also serve as an introduction for University teacher candidates into the community of practice of teaching (Wenger, 1998). Teacher candidates learn the language and practices of teaching through these apprenticeships that continue with full time student teaching before earning certification. Wenger (1998) describes three dimensions that characterize communities of practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. According to Wenger, mutual engagement involves a diverse group of people working together to negotiate meaning with each other. Central to this negotiation of meaning is the members effort towards a joint

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