

Teacher Education Student Attitudes Toward School-Based Field Placements and Traditional University-Delivered Courses

DAN SHEPHERD

Professor, Missouri Western State University

Sanghee Yeon

Associate Professor, Defense Language Institute

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Abstract

This survey-centered study explores student preferences related to school-based field placements, prime examples of applied learning in that field, and the impact of those practical experiences on student motivation to succeed in classroom-delivered courses, student perception about whether these applied learning placements made traditional coursework more valuable to them, and perception about whether student teaching and similar field placements inspired them more to become effective classroom teachers. The survey was completed by 47 education students nearing the end of their teacher training program at a mid-sized Midwestern, open-enrollment state university. While it was expected that survey findings would be positive, the extent to which students embraced these applied learning experiences and perceived them to be valuable for learning outside the field placement was more positive than expected. In summary, students strongly sense that field experiences motivate them to do better in traditional courses, help them understand more the need for the content of those courses, and inspire them to work even harder to become effective teachers. While the numeric data from the survey is instructional, actual student comments more powerfully convey their very positive attitudes toward applied learning experiences in the field of teacher education.

Introduction

Teacher education students traditionally complete a series of content-focused and pedagogically themed university-delivered courses before participating in a series of school-based field placement that often culminate in what is commonly referred to as “student teaching,” a semester or year long placement in a classroom working closely alongside an experienced teacher while receiving supervision and support from a college professor or adjunct. This survey-based study explores student perceptions of the impact of those field placements on the value students place on their traditional university-delivered courses, on their motivation to master the content included in those courses, and on their inspiration to become effective classroom teachers. The survey was completed by 47 students nearing the end of their teacher training program of study at a mid-sized Midwestern university. While the survey’s numeric data was collected and analyzed, student comments on more open-ended questions were also very valuable for the purposes of this study and are summarized later in this report.

Research Questions

The foundational research question we explored was, “How do teacher education students feel about their applied learning experiences in schools, working with real students and teachers while learning to become more effective classroom instructors and managers?” Related research questions, which were then used as the foundation of the survey’s questions, included the following:

- How do school-based field experiences motivate teacher education students to strive diligently in their university classroom coursework?
- How do school-based field experiences make university-delivered classroom coursework more valuable to teacher education students?
- How do school-based field experiences inspire teacher education students to become better teachers?

Literature Review

As might be expected, all research related to student preferences about field placements and applied learning are very positive. In general, students greatly prefer learning that occurs while embedded in a practical setting, or school in the case of teacher education students.

Student-Reported Benefits of Field Experiences in Teacher Education

Numerous benefits of field experiences in teacher education have previously been explored. These include student professional and personal growth and more positive feelings about teaching as a profession (Baeten, Simons, Schelfhout, & Pinxten, 2018). A survey of 95 elementary education students found that field experiences, while sometimes causing some students to

have a slightly decreased desire to become classroom teachers, resulted in strongly positive attitudes toward the career of teaching and toward the school environment (Anderson, 1987). Pre-service middle school teachers reported an increase in their ability to provide and confidence in providing meaningful feedback to students as a result of their participation in an online applied learning experience (Thomas & Sondergeld, 2015).

The issue of efficacy, or the individual teacher's belief that s/he makes a positive difference in students' lives and learning, has been frequently considered. In one 2015 study, 30 pre-service teachers in a field-based science methods course reported a significant increase in their overall and science teaching efficacy (Flores, 2015). A similar study had similar results with teacher candidates reporting a significant increase in efficacy as a result of placement in an elementary science applied learning program (Flores I. M., 2015). Physical education teacher candidates report an increasing sense of confidence as teachers and enthusiasm for teaching as a result of working one-on-one among actual students with severe and profound disabilities (Estel Layne & Blasingame, 2018).

Student Perceptions about Clinical Practice in Teacher Preparation

In a study very similar to this one, 28 elementary education students were surveyed about their perceptions about the impact of field experiences on their development as future classroom teachers. A significant majority of these students reported that their clinical practice assignments helped them see the realities of the school environment, enabled them the opportunity to reflect about their own professional development, provided them with observable models of exemplary practice, and, among other benefits, taught them how to develop rapport with children (Singh, 2017). Pre-service teachers recognize the need for a close connection between their university courses and their field experiences, especially in the area of lesson planning (Santoyo & Zhang, Spring 2016). An extensive study of 124 future English-language learner teachers found that field experiences change the perceived concerns pre-service teachers have about teaching: in general, field experiences tend to increase the confidence level of pre-service teachers, making them more effective instructors in the classroom setting (Arslan & Ilin, 2018). In a study of six pre-service elementary mathematics teachers, researchers found that these students' beliefs about technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) improved as a result their participation in field experiences; in fact, field experiences, more so than methods courses, had the most effect on their beliefs about this (Kartal & Cinar, 2018). A small study of four pre-service mathematics teachers similarly found, as a result of their placement in a real-world classroom, that these students perceived greater confidence for progressive teaching, for improved self-assessment of their teaching, and for the identification of supplemental teaching resources (Stickles, 2015).

Connections Between Teaching Effectiveness and Field Experiences

Student nurses reported a belief that the most important aspect of a field experience is its length, preferring field placements that last at least a week. They also prefer an actively engaged in-placement instructor and field experiences that required full participation (Macindo, Dangaman, Soriano, Kho, & Bongar, 2019). Social work students reported increased levels of self-efficacy when their program of study included significant content in the field of emphasis that is partnered with focused practicum opportunities in the subject being studied (Olson, 2011). As a result of a focused field experience program that involved the video-recorded analysis of their teaching at the elementary level, physical education pre-service teachers experienced significant improvement in their ability to deliver meaningful feedback (Ramos, Esslinger, & Pyle, 2015). One fascinating study questioned the usual, almost exclusive emphasis in field experiences. These researchers were much more nuanced in their approach and in their findings, determining that field experiences must be paired with meaningful self-reflection to be fully effective in training successful classroom teachers (Barnes & Smagorinsky, 2016). The impact of field experiences on pre-service secondary mathematics teachers was found to have some unexpected and possibly negative results: as a result of their applied learning placements, some of these future teachers determined that progressive and student-centered pedagogical approaches were only for advanced students and that only advanced students were academically motivated (Jones Frank & Apollon Williams, 2016). Even early program field experiences seem to possess this beneficial effect. A 2017 study found that pre-service teachers develop improved instructional skills, classroom management approaches, and lesson design abilities in applied learning experiences early in their teacher training programs (Welsh & Schaffer, 2017). Kazemi and Waage (2015) found that, when field experiences are partnered intentionally with university-delivered methods courses, pre-service teachers grew in their ability to direct goal-focused lessons and in their ability to foster deeper student thinking, and these field experiences, to have a positive impact, do not have to be long. A 2016 study found that participation in a four-week summer STEM camp had a positive impact on pre-service teachers' efficacy in science instruction (McGlamery, Franks, & Shillingstad).

In conclusion, a massive meta-synthesis of well over 100 studies determined that, by far, the most important pre-service teacher development practices included extended student teaching experiences (Dunst, Hamby, B., Wilkie, & Annas, 2019).

Method

This project surveyed 47 education students nearing the end of their teacher training program regarding their perceptions of the impact of school-based field experiences on their own development as future teachers and on their learning in traditional university-based courses.

Survey Development

To increase the overall content validity of the survey, it was pre-tested with a small sample population of approximately 10 students. Their feedback was instrumental in making beneficial improvements to the survey's wording and presentation. Results from the pilot survey indicated a need to simplify the survey questions but to expand the options for responding from a 4-point Likert to a 10-point preference scale. The basic research question of this study was, "How do teacher education students feel about their applied learning experiences in schools, working with real students and teachers while learning to become more effective classroom instructors and managers?"

Survey Questions

Based on the formal survey development practices summarized above, the following set of questions were created.

1. Field Experiences & Motivation in Teacher Preparation Coursework • Rate the following statement on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being total agreement and 1 being absolutely no agreement with the statement: My field experiences motivated me to work even harder in my coursework because I experienced the need for improved preparation.
2. Field Experiences & Value of Teacher Education Coursework • Rate the following statement on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being total agreement and 1 being absolutely no agreement with the statement: My field experiences made my coursework much more valuable to me since I could see how the content applied to the real-world classroom setting.
3. Field Experiences & Inspiration to Become an Excellent Teacher • Rate the following statement on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being total agreement and 1 being absolutely no agreement with the statement: My field experiences have inspired me even more to become a better teacher since I have seen the impact I can have and the work that will require.

Sample

Missouri Western State University (MWSU) is an open-enrollment regional public university of about 5,000 undergraduate students near St. Joseph, Missouri, a relatively economically disadvantaged community. The MWSU Department of Education serves over 400 majors, primarily in the area of elementary education. About 150 of these students who were closer to the end of their programs of study were invited to participate in this survey; of these, 47 responded, for a response rate of 32%. The programs represented by these students include three major field experiences: an initial observation included with the first introductory course, a "junior experience" where students complete the instruction of a unit, and student teaching, a semester-long experience where

students eventually assume almost all teaching responsibilities for a cooperating teacher. In addition to these formal placements, elementary and early childhood education students also complete field experiences as part of their literacy and mathematics methods courses. Survey respondents included mostly those students who had already participated in their “junior experience,” leaving only the culminating student teaching experience before the conclusion of their programs and graduation.

Within the education department where the survey was administered, students were mostly white (92%), female (85%), and aged 25 years old or less (74%). Additionally, 62% of program participants possessed cumulative grade point averages of 3.0 or higher. Finally, 37% of teacher trainees in this university had household incomes of \$50,000 or less.

Quantitative Analysis

While a review of numeric data is helpful, because of the incredibly positive ratings students gave the impact of field experiences on their learning, student comments, summarized below, do a better job of capturing the passion students have for learning to teach while actually teaching. Nevertheless, averages on a ten-point scale for each survey question are provided below in Table 1. It is clear from these numeric findings that students strongly perceive that school-based field experiences motivate them to learn as much as possible in their non-field experience, content-stressed courses; 29 of the 47 respondents rated this topic a 9 or 10 with 10 being the highest possible rating. For professors and other education instructors interested in highlighting the importance of their traditionally delivered courses and motivating students to learn it well, a powerful means of accomplishing that is placement in field experiences. Students were also very positive about the impact of field experiences on their perception of a traditional course’s value to them as future teachers; 32 of 47 responded to this survey question with the two highest possible ratings of 9 or 10.

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the best possible classroom teachers, and these future teachers themselves perceive that field experiences are the most motivational way to accomplish this fundamental programmatic mission.

How do school-based field experiences motivate teacher education students to strive diligently in their university classroom coursework?	8.51 <i>average response</i>
How do school-based field experiences make university-delivered classroom coursework more valuable to teacher education students?	8.42 <i>average response</i>
How do school-based field experiences inspire teacher education students to become better teachers?	9.34 <i>average response</i>

Table 1. Student Response Averages for Each Survey Question (1-10 Scale)

Qualitative Analysis

As previously mentioned, while the numeric data are informative, the student open-ended comments are similarly beneficial for teacher preparers. In the student comments provided below, no changes have been made to the student’s actual phrasing.

Students repeatedly expressed a belief that their applied learning experiences in public school settings increased their motivation for learning in university-based courses. Some pre-service teachers commented that, when working within a classroom of P-12 students, they felt a sense of greater need to know and to practice concepts and approaches that were presented in their traditional teacher training coursework. Others had similar feelings as they worked with actual students, thinking that they had a tremendous responsibility to be as prepared as possible on behalf of their own students. Finally, some students grew in motivation for college courses because their field experiences showed them precisely where their learning deficiencies and teacher development gaps were. In the area of improved motivation for classroom learning, students made the following comments:

- “I noticed in my field experiences that the teachers were saying things like, ‘I wish I had paid more attention in my methods classes’ so that has really motivated me to try to understand as much as possible in my

classes to be as prepared as possible when I enter the classroom setting.”

- “In my sophomore experience, I observed so much that it really made me open my eyes. I knew the minute I saw those children learning that this is exactly what I want to do for the rest of my life. I was motivated to keep learning more and more in my classrooms to know how to better help the children in my future classroom.”
- “I find that because of these experiences I have been able to see where I am as a teacher and what I need to improve on. I am able to ask my professors what to do in situations I would not normally know to ask about.”

Similarly, field experiences had a very positive impact on students in seeing the value of the content in their university-based courses. Many commented that the information they were taught did not become real to them until they practiced it with actual P-12 students. Others felt like their preparation before working with students would have been insufficient. It was only after teaching actual students of their own did they realize what was necessary for success. In the area of recognizing increased benefit to course content, students made the following comments:

- “Especially in the EDU 351 [Elementary Math Methods] class, seeing and doing the content really helped put into perspective what we will be doing and helped me see things that I want to do in my classroom versus what I can’t.”
- “When I noticed the children learning from their teachers, I wanted to do the same. I have put more effort into really understanding my course assignments and readings because if I do not, I will not be the teacher I have always dreamed of becoming.”
- “When planning my weekly Group Intervention lessons, I felt as though I was already preparing like I will when I officially become a teacher. This gave my assignments more purpose because, if I didn’t have a plan, then I would have 5 little eyes staring up at me waiting for me to tell them what we were going to do today during our time together. I could never let them down, which meant I worked hard at designing and creating lessons to make our time worthwhile.”

Most importantly, pre-service teachers expressed opinions about how the applied learning of field experiences energized and inspired them to strive even more passionately to become a strong classroom instructor. They stated that they needed to see learning occurring by looking into the eyes of their own P-12 students before the importance of the task impacted them fully. By seeing what students need and the challenges that students face, preservice teachers were moved individually to improve their teaching abilities. In the area of personal

inspiration to become an effective teacher, students made the following comments:

- “I strongly think that I wouldn't be so excited to be a teacher if it weren't for these classes. I am so, so, so, so, so, SO dang excited/anxious to become a teacher. It is my passion, and I thank Missouri Western State University's education program for allowing me to express it.”
- “The instant I saw the young children learning, I was inspired to do so much more. I knew when I was really young that I wanted to be a teacher but the minute I stepped into a real classroom, I knew teaching is exactly what I want to do for the rest of my life. I love to see children learning and being the reason behind why they are learning. It makes me feel special and needed.”
- “I did a lot of my experiences at a lower income/Title school, and I can honestly say it inspired me the most to become the best teacher that I can possibly be. I want to change the lives of young kids and teach them as much as I can. I do not think I would feel this way without the teaching experiences I was given.”

Final Student Comment

- “You can talk about teaching all you want, but you never really know what you would say/do until you are out there actually doing it. Being able to actually practice teaching and connecting with kids, is the best possible way to work on being a real teacher.”

Student Caveats

While students are, as demonstrated by both the summary data and student comments provided above, very positive about the impact and benefit of school-based field experiences on their classroom learning and development as teachers, they did provide some important caveats to the field experience process. These were issues to avoid or to clarify within the field experience process.

First, student teachers were often confused or bothered by some working classroom teachers who did not model what the students themselves had been taught at the university. For example, many students commented that, while they themselves valued the approach presented in their *Teaching with Love and Logic* (Fay & Funk, 1995) classroom management textbook, they often observed actual teachers disregarding those principles.

Second, students were very clear that field experiences must have ample processing or debriefing with peers and professors to make them fully effective. Often, students valued the experience but found it perplexing or stressful if the opportunity to discuss the experience was not provided. Seminar courses that were provided in association with major field experiences were rated as very

beneficial by student teachers. These courses were very helpful in providing some context for the experiences and gave students a much-needed chance to process what they were learning.

Third, students reported that some field experiences do not go as well as possible because of the “fit” with the assigned classroom teacher or because of what this teacher permitted or required the student to do in the classroom. As with everything in education, relationships matter. If the relationship between the student and his or her assigned classroom teacher is hampered, for whatever reason, then the field experience is never as beneficial as it otherwise might have been. Struggling relationships result in reduced communication, in uncomfortable interaction, and in the necessary ability to grow together. When this happens between a cooperating teacher and a student teacher, the applied learning cannot flourish.

Finally, students emphasized that field experiences do not really “tell the whole story.” One student commented that s/he did not “see how [teachers] plan, the curriculum meetings and reasons behind those decisions.” While the student teaching experience – a semester-long foray into actual classroom teacher – seems to be able to include most of what teaching is and requires, even it lacks some elements that actual teachers must manage. Student teachers have limited interaction with parents, are not as responsible to the building principal as the classroom teacher is, and are not responsible for setting final grades. In these and other ways, field experiences, while incredibly beneficial, only provide a sample of the full responsibilities of a contracted teacher.

Limitations

Several limitations are evident from this study. First, the total number of survey respondents is limited. Because the target audience for the survey was only students nearing completion of a mid-sized teacher education program, the number of participants in the study is necessarily small. As a result, the applicability of the study to other areas is reduced. A larger scale study, though, including a similar student population would enhance and reinforce the findings included herein.

Second, the student population surveyed was very homogeneous in demographics. Almost all students were; as previously specified; female, white, and lower middle class. Other voices were simply not included in the sample. It was be interesting to know if minority or other diverse students perceive field experiences similarly, but this study was clearly limited by its tightly focused group of students.

Third, as with all survey studies, there are questions about the benefit of self-perceptions. Related to this caveat is the concern that pre-service teachers who have very limited school experience truly know what is in the best interests of their professional development as teachers. Even though the survey was entirely anonymous, some students may have intended to provide answers that they thought their professor wanted to hear. Others may have simply worked rapidly through the survey because of other priorities, not really carefully

providing accurate replies to the survey's questions.

Finally, this survey simply caught a single moment in time. While it is reasonable to assume that these results would be repeated: students generally always state a preference for real world learning over classroom-based learning. That assumption may not necessarily be true. The partiality toward field experiences may be cyclical, or it may just be generational with current Generation Z. If the same survey were given now, it is very unlikely that identical numeric results or comments would be garnered.

For Practice

Implications for Practice and Future Research

The most obvious implication for teacher preparation institutions is the strong emphasis on field experiences. Not only do students strongly recommend them as the very best preparation for a career in teaching, but also students perceive that field placements enhance their motivation for traditional in-class learning and the value they place on those in-class learning experiences. Most teacher training programs provide an initial observational experience and a final culminating field experience, often referred to as student teaching, but additional field courses should be considered. Methods courses can be moved to school settings, and other lengthy field placements can be added in lieu of traditional content-driven or philosophy-based courses.

Related to this would be a greater emphasis on connecting traditional, content-based courses more closely with field experiences. Since students really see the benefit of field experiences and since they perceive that their field experiences enhance their motivation for and appreciation of in-class courses, professors would do well to seek to identify and to emphasize how course content is applied meaningfully in field experiences. In classroom management courses, for example, instructors could stress how students should respond when their own P-12 pupils express a lack of motivation for learning or a lack of decorum in behavior. In educational psychology or child development courses, professors could similarly stress ways in which their course content will be observed and experienced in real classroom settings among real elementary or secondary students.

For Future Research

Several possible lines of research appear evident from this initial study. First, this and other similar studies tend to focus tightly on a demographic group, in this case middle class white females. A broader study with more participants would make these findings much more transferrable to more teacher training settings and provide more credence to the argument that teacher training should evolve, as much as possible, to include higher and higher percentages of applied learning experiences in actual school setting with real P-12 students.

Second, this study was entirely survey-based and, while it did include some numeric data for consideration, it was much more qualitative than quantitative.

This approach, therefore, did not measure actual effectiveness, only perceived effectiveness. A follow-up study to measure actual instructional effectiveness compared between preservice teachers taught more in university classrooms versus those with higher amounts of applied learning would be beneficial. While it is assumed that field-trained teachers are better teachers, if actual P-12 student standardized assessments indicate otherwise, teacher training institutions should know this before significant programmatic changes are implemented. It certainly seems unlikely, but it may actually be that training preservice teachers in university classrooms is better than training them in public school settings.

Finally, this study asked how field experiences augment university-based courses as though the two were disconnected. Research into how those two seemingly disparate categories of instruction can better be unified would be very beneficial. Most teacher preparers understand that a strong connection between what is learned in the university classroom and then applied in the school setting can be very helpful. The two course-types working together in tandem, mutually supporting and guiding each other, is likely the best method of teacher training possible, but research is needed to support that assertion.