

Preparing for Student Teaching: Preservice Teacher Reflections on Field Experience

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Abstract: *This qualitative study takes place at a regional public university and partner public K-12 school district in the Southwestern United States. The study asked the research question: How have field experiences, in senior block courses, influenced/shaped students' perceptions in the semester before student teaching? Reflective data was collected from preservice teachers participating in a field course the semester prior to student teaching. This research is significant to understanding how to prepare preservice teachers. . The findings indicate that field experience is valuable to preservice teacher development, particularly surrounding fostering equitable classrooms.*

Key Words: Preservice teachers, field experience, reflective practice

Ingersoll et al. (2014) analyzes data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) a trend that revealed a high percentage of new teacher attrition. Ingersoll et al. (2014) reported 41 percent attrition of new teachers within 5 years; however, the percentage of minority teachers is increasing from 12.4 percent in 1987-88 to 17.3 percent in 2011-12. Ha (2018) found that new teachers experienced inconsistencies between the preparation programs and real classroom experiences in that they had difficulty transforming from emergent to professional teachers. This paper shares the reflections about teacher preparedness of six preservice teachers enrolled at a southwestern university in their last semester of field experience before student teaching. These preservice teachers were enrolled in intensive semester-long field senior block courses. . The data collected is from a pre and post questionnaire used to capture their perceptions about self-preparedness as an emergent teacher based on their field experiences during that semester. During the semester, these preservice teachers were assigned to classrooms with a mentor at a university partner school district. Through field hours, the preservice teachers completed a standard set of days in which they developed pedagogical and content knowledge and skills while planning and teaching under the guidance of the mentor and oversight by course professors.

The premise of this preservice teacher immersion experience is rooted in reflective practice and community-teacher partnership. . The study participants had courses that delve into the importance of cultural connections (Howard, 2003; Delpit, 1995), the significance of organization and preparation (Wong, Wong, Jondahl, & Ferguson, 2014), and on how reflection can inform practice (Dewey, 1933 & Zeichner and Liston, 1996). Dewey (1897) argued that reflection on

experience was important to understanding and deeper awareness. Zeichner and Liston, (1996) take that further and see reflection as a social justice tool. The purpose of the questionnaire was to ask the research question: How have field experiences, in senior block courses, influenced/shaped students' perceptions in the semester before student teaching?

METHOD

This study focuses on the importance of reflective teaching practices in preparing emergent teachers. A questionnaire was used to engage the preservice teachers in reflective analysis of self and context of the learning environment within the classroom (Zeichner and Liston, 2014). In general, questionnaires can be used to collect data from individuals in self-reporting (Ho, O'Farrell, Hong, & You, 2006). This information offers a glimpse into how preservice teachers perceive their growth based on their own experiences and realization within the field-based course. The pre-questionnaire (see Table 1A) captured the expectations of each student before they began their field experience. The students completed the pre-questionnaire free style while in class and each student gave the handwritten responses directly to the professor. In contrast, due to Covid-19, after spring break, the course went virtual and the students completed the post questionnaire electronically, and sent the answers to the professor as an attachment through electronic.

RESEARCH SITE AND PARTICIPANTS

This research takes place in rural public university with a partnering public school district in the Southwestern United States. The university is a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and is located in a town of approximately 16, 000 residents (US Census, 2019). The town has a 19.1% poverty rate (US Census, 2019). The sample population consists of education majors in their final semester before student teaching. These students are referred to as senior block and are referred to as preservice teachers in this paper.

The design of the senior block consists of student immersion in field experiences every Tuesday for the standard school day at local public schools and in university classes every Thursday from morning through afternoon with variation, depending on individual program requirements. For example, elementary education majors take science methods whereas K-12 and subject area majors take requirements according to their program degree. The senior block classroom management course addresses three areas; classroom management, literacy (which is subdivided into literacy in secondary education or literacy foundations in elementary), and assessment. The course instructor designed and collected the data in this study. The main themes of classroom management surround the importance of cultural connections (Howard, 2003), the significance of organization and preparation (Wong), and on how reflection can inform practice (Dewey, 1933 & Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

The sample of participants for this study consisted of six students: Three elementary education, one English secondary, one music K-12, and one physical education K-12. Five of the six passed the requirements to student-teach in the next semester. The remaining one needs to pass the Praxis exam in the content area of concentration (elementary education). The students were five white females and one Hispanic male. Two of these students identified as middle class, two as low socio-economic income. Of the middle class white females, one identified as bilingual, one of the low-socio-economic females also identified as lesbian. Of the female students, two were EC-6 elementary education majors; two were all level education, one majoring in music and the other student in kinesiology, with the remaining female student majoring in English Language

Arts, 7-12. The single male in the class was Hispanic, low socioeconomic and majoring in EC-6 elementary education.

The six students enrolled in the senior block courses agreed to complete the questionnaire at the beginning of the spring, 2020 semester and again at the end of the same semester. The questionnaire was purposefully designed to ask each of the preservice teachers a set of reflective questions, asking how they perceived their individual role as an educator in managing the culture of learning within the classrooms they were assigned to for the semester.

FINDINGS

The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine if the student answers reflected three major themes of the teacher preparation coursework and the field experience during the senior block semester prior to student teaching: cultural connection, pedagogical skills development, and reflective practices. The purpose of the questionnaire was to ask the research question: How have field experiences, in senior block courses, influenced/shaped students' perceptions in the semester before student teaching?

The answers to the four questions by the six students for both the pre and post questionnaires were compiled, transcribed from hand written to type print as needed in order to review and resend to students to ensure accuracy was not lost in the process. Words and phrases with direct meaning to the questions in the questionnaire were lifted from the student responses and added to a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was set up in order to compare the words and phrases between the pre and post questionnaire. In the findings, to ensure anonymity, each student is referred to using a pseudonym. There were six students, five female students, and one male student. The female students identified as white and the male student identified as Hispanic.

Once the answers were collected and reviewed, text and phrases were taken from each answer for all students and placed in a table (see Table 1A) along with the questions. The words and phrases are set up in Table 1A in two separate columns, one for the pre and the post responses. In general, after careful observation, responses in the pre-questionnaire were broad and sweeping for the majority of the group. In reviewing the student responses from the questionnaire at the beginning of the semester, there are similar expectations described by the students. The answers in the pre questionnaire show common expectations such as “build a social relationship students will respect” “acknowledge and value diversity”, “I am prepared to teach in a diverse setting.” In the answers to the same questions when the semester was over, the responses included reference to experience in the field such as “understand the skill level of your student,” “structured routine,” “correct level of teaching.”

In the pre questionnaire, the students share general expectations that include the importance of acknowledging diversity, building relationships, fostering a safe and comfortable learning environment, and having a sense of awareness that not all students learn the same way. For example, Detnas, the Hispanic male in the group, answered the first question with comments like “reflect on the positives and negatives in [my teachers’] lessons.” “I imagine myself as a kid...what I would expect from the lesson.” In the second question, he uses words and phrases such as “build a social relationship” and “students will respect [teachers].” In the third question, he commented about an “open mind” and highlighted “keep students engaged”, but again, he referred to himself as he did in the first question with “I picture myself as a student.” Sierra, a white female who identifies as middle class, highlighted in the first question, “acknowledge and value individuality”, and wanting to “reach all unique types of students.” In the second question, she emphasized the

importance of a “comfortable environment”, and of “develop[ing] relationships.” From the third question, Sierra predicted she would encounter a “plethora of unique students”, and putting value in “keep[ing] the students engaged.” Finally, from the fourth question, based on her answer she acknowledged the importance of field experience. She referred to prior experience in the field with other courses by saying “observations have been useful.” Overall, her answer to the fourth question before the senior block field experience, she emphasized the importance of being in the field to learn to improve her pedagogical knowledge through the lens of diversity.

In the post questionnaire, the students had completed the senior block course work and field experience. The responses reflect a richer experience in the field with specific pedagogical and professional references. For example, in first question, Braylee emphasized the importance of “keeping in account who my students are...what backgrounds [the students came from]”, while connecting this information when she “designs lessons.” She also wanted to make sure that she “represent[ed] [the students] in the material”. She suggested if she had a “lots of [H]ispanic kids” then she would “include [H]ispanic literature.” In the second question, Braylee wanted to establish “a foundation of respect” based on an understanding of the students in order to foster a successful learning environment. In the third question, she brought back in the importance of meeting the needs of all students. In her answer, she recommended when teaching concepts in her lessons, she would “find another way to get across the same concept.” Again, she suggested that based on the needs of her “different students,” she wants to provide a space that supports her students by setting up places for them to “read in different positions or places”. In the fourth question, she acknowledged that she had “observed many different teachers”. She recognized that some of these teachers were “good examples” and others were “bad examples”. She saw “things that work...things that didn’t”. This reflective response showed how her field experience was a catalyst to bringing her closer to the teacher she wanted to be. In her words, to have a “better idea... [of] how to teach”.

Overall, each student response reflected in some way their experiences at the field schools in senior block. In the answers from the post questionnaire, students included strategies for teaching or setting up a classroom to better use the space. Frequently, in the answers the words respect, caring, even love was used to describe how to connect with the learners in the field classroom. From the answers, there is reference to specific strategies, methods of classroom management when working with diverse learners.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that field experiences matter, particularly when preparing teachers with a focus on developing equitable learning environments. Irvine (2003) argues that educators should develop a cultural eye to be change agents. Howard and Aleman (2008) look at the complexity of the student and consider the student background, knowledge, and individual culture. Howard and Aleman (2008) argue to embrace community and promote equity throughout preservice experience. The group of preservice students were predominately white and female, however, based on how each one of them identified, they brought unique lived experiences that invited compassion and empathy.

In this preliminary study, the information gained from the responses by the preservice teachers to a pre and post semester questionnaire demonstrate the significance of hands on experiences. Based on the findings, it is clear that field experience provided the preservice teachers a greater understanding of what can work and may not work when teaching to a group of diverse

learners. Each preservice teacher appreciated that respect, caring for, and getting to know the students was step one to fostering a positive learning experience.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1A.
Text and phrases taken from the answers to the questionnaires

Question	Pre questionnaire	Post questionnaire
Describe 2-3 actions you take while designing and planning a lesson to acknowledge and value individuality while building on content and knowledge acquisition?	imagine myself as a kid; be engaging; diversity; relate to each culture; include students' interest; feel comfortable and safe; acknowledge and value individuality; reach all unique types of students; differentiated instruction; value individuality; all students abilities; they can relate to; students don't feel restricted; options; multiple intelligence; student is different	differentiation lessons; Individual learning strengths; same skill in differentiated ways; each student is being valued; cultural background and interests; engagement and motivation; Make connections; build this relationship; students can have decisions understand the skill level of your students; knowing the student; they will enjoy learning; correct level of teaching; multiple extensions; refinements planned throughout; design lessons; Represent them in the material; include [student's culture] in literature; designing a lesson; kids making it their own.
Describe how building social relationships foster effective classroom management. Provide an example.	build a social relationships; respect; keep other students in line; safe environment; relationships; show support for you; comfortable environment; know the students; develop relationship; engage students in conversation; his students respect and care about his opinion; get to know your students	feel they are cared about; willing to learn; kids need love, care, and guidance; Build relationships; respect teacher; icebreakers; safe learning environment; community within the classroom; accountability; structured routine; learn and make mistakes; build trust; don't want to disappoint; will trust what you say; respect them as people; more willing to listen; learn. students are people; [learn from] parents or the students.
How does your planning and instruction take the learning environment into consideration?	relate my teaching to student backgrounds; keep students engaged; unique students; keeping students in mind; keep the students engaged; Need to know my students	bring [students] needs into consideration; planning and delivering instruction; relate the lesson; safe for every student; comfortable and confident; activities that help students get the most out of the lesson; learning environment super important when designing lessons; need space; walls can have concept reminders; inspire students; do research; structure and routine in place; do not get overwhelmed; find another way to get across the same concepts; different students; read in different positions or places; learning environment; Chairs to read or reading area; wall space; word wall; play

Describe how your clinical experience influences you in preparing for a role as a classroom teacher in diverse learning environments.

observing different classrooms; differentiate instruction; diverse learning cultures; different environments; taught differently; different groups

time and thought into planning lessons; Each kid differs; know the community; involved with the kids and their families; [teachers] should listen and learn; different perspectives; Diversity; unique perspective; value and use each student's experience; seeing how teachers use diversity; seeing how diversity is ignored; more love and attention; teacher in real life; teacher student interactions; exposure to different cultures; different backgrounds as my home life; relate to students; observing different teachers; things that worked; things that didn't; multiple learning styles; being a "second mom"
