Field experiences and teacher education programs: What is and what if?

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Abstract
The emphasis in U.S. teacher preparation programs is shifting from the college campus to the P-12 school. But will augmenting the field-based component in teacher education programs result in desired program improvements? Is the field where teacher education candidates learn the knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to navigate once they are in their own classrooms? Do field experiences by themselves lead to growth? Does a mere increase in the number of hours of field experience result in the strengthening of desired program competencies? Perhaps not. The authors explore the challenges and possibilities for teacher education field experiences, describe and analyze actual field experience scenarios in P-12 schools at four stages in their own university’s teacher preparation program – observation, exploration, pre-student teaching, and student teaching and then offer suggestions for maximizing the value of field experience.

Key words: field experience, teacher education candidate (TEC), teacher preparation program components

Introduction
U.S. teacher educators continue to grapple with the identification and implementation of practices to equip future teachers with content knowledge, knowledge of learners and the learning process, pedagogical repertoires and professional dispositions. In addition, they face the challenge of balancing off-site P-12 field experiences with on-campus coursework. Meanwhile, their programs are under increasing scrutiny, unsettling pressure and mounting criticism from the U.S. Department of Education, state departments of education, the National Council of Accreditation for Teacher Education, the media and the public at large. In an address at Columbia University’s Teachers College, U.S. Secretary of Education Duncan (2009) commented, “By almost any standard, many if not most of the nation’s 1,450 schools, colleges, and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st century classroom. America’s university-based teacher preparation programs need revolutionary change – not evolutionary tinkering.”

According to Ball and Forzani (2010), “Public confidence in the value of university-based teacher education is low. In fact, there is widespread skepticism about professional preparation for teaching, with many advocating for a strong liberal education coupled with on-the-job experience.” (p. 8) Issues include unclear and inconsistent teacher education program goals, delivery systems that are idiosyncratic rather than research-based, a lack of focus upon the reality of contemporary classrooms especially in terms of working with culturally and linguistically diverse learners and students with exceptionalities in the general education setting, and disappointingly high attrition rates among program graduates with nearly half of all new teachers...
leaving the profession within five years (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996).

Solutions proposed for the crisis in teacher preparation emphasize a change of setting from the college campus to the P-12 school. As this shift in program emphasis is effectuated, we, as teacher educator practitioners, have chosen to focus our inquiry upon the actual impact of field experiences upon our own students.

Research context
We have been working as teacher educators and conducting action research at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania, one of fourteen universities that comprise the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. Our university is located in the Pocono Mountain region, 85 miles from Pennsylvania’s largest city, Philadelphia. It enrolls approximately 950 teacher education candidates: 77% female; 83% white; 6% African-American; 5% Latino and 1% Asian. These local teacher education candidate demographics closely mirror national trends for U.S. public school teachers: 76% female; 83% white; 7% African-American; 7% Latino; and 1% Asian (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Research focus and methodology
The essential questions that we set the launchpad of our investigation are whether augmenting the field-based component in teacher education programs results in desired program improvements, if it is in the field where teacher education candidates (TECs) learn that which is needed to navigate once they are in their own classrooms, and if field experiences in and of themselves lead to growth.

In this article, we share on-going action research. We contextualize this research in a general discussion of the role of field experiences, issues and challenges in arranging for TEC field work and the value of field experiences. Then, using examples from our own work with TECs, by way of anecdotal evidence, we describe, analyze and reflect upon TEC field experiences in P-12 schools at four stages in our program – observation; exploration; pre-student teaching; and student teaching. Finally, based upon our description, analysis and reflection, we offer suggestions for a plan of action to improve teaching and learning; namely, what TECs, school-based mentors and university faculty can do to maximize the value of the field experience component in the teacher preparation curriculum.

The role of field experiences
Ideally, the field experience component in teacher preparation programs provides TECs with sequential, developmentally appropriate, well-supervised in-a-real-classroom activities beginning with the first semester of college study and culminating with the final semester of student teaching. Teacher education candidates need field experiences to understand the significance of learning contexts, the diversity of learner characteristics and the complexities of teaching. In some instances, field experiences lead TECs to question their career choice. However, much more frequently, TECs report that these field experiences are impactful, motivating highlights of their college years.
For example, after one of our students, Joey, a freshman TEC – Class of 2015, returned to his home district to interview and observe a teacher in his targeted area of certification, in his reflective essay, he affirmed: “It is one thing to learn about what you should do as a teacher, to learn about educational concepts on campus in coursework, but to see these concepts implemented in a real life situation opened my eyes to what teaching is all about. It made me excited to become a teacher and reminded me why I am here in school right now.”

**Issues and challenges in arranging for TEC field work**

Design and implementation of field experiences come with significant obstacles. First of all, there needs to be shared commitment, effective communication and cohesiveness within and across the faculties of the colleges of arts and sciences where TECs are expected to acquire content knowledge, the colleges of education where they are expected to learn pedagogy and the P-12 settings where TECs are expected to apply learning from university coursework. But, more often than not, these organizations function as “loosely coupled systems”. (Bidwell, 1965) According to the National Research Council (2000), “The components of teacher education programs – collections of courses, field experiences, and student teaching – tend to be disjointed; they are often taught or overseen by people who have little ongoing communication with each other” (p. 201). Elsewhere, Bain and Moje (2012) affirmed, “Current teacher education comprises ill-organized sets of educational experiences in different spaces, for different purposes, and led by people who don’t work with one another and may never even have met” (p.62). They contend that amid these confusing silos, without necessary, intentional interventions, TECs are often left to navigate for themselves (2012).

Selection of school sites and school-based mentors is also of critical importance to TEC development and should be done based upon considerations of quality, with candidates placed where they will most likely be exposed to exemplary teaching and learning. As Professor Darling-Hammond reminded (2006), “It is impractical to expect to prepare teachers for schools as they should be if teachers are constrained to learn in settings that typify the problems of schools as they have been” (p. 308). Regrettably, selection is frequently based upon convenience factors such as the school’s proximity to the college campus, space availability, or school-based personnel willingness to accept candidates into specific classrooms. In these contexts, TECs may be receiving mixed messages, encouraged in their university coursework to do the opposite of what is modeled at their field experience sites.

For example, one of our Spanish TECs, Lauren, Class of 2013, was paired with a high school Spanish teacher for her pre-student teaching fieldwork. During the semester, on campus she was required to prepare a unit of study for a Spanish 1 course with a ten lesson sequence, each lesson following a framework that included learning objectives, standards, topics, materials, an “at-the-bell” activity, an anticipatory set, a teaching the content section, guided practice activities, tiered questions, checks for understanding, homework, closure, contingency plans and a self-evaluation. In sharp contrast, Lauren’s field mentor demonstrated little planning. In a field experience reflection paper, one of the prompts was: Discuss the differences you noted between your field experience and the ideas presented in your on-campus course. In response to this prompt, Lauren wrote, “My field mentor never had any lesson plans. Her unit plans had no detail. This was completely different from what we were doing in my on-campus class.”
Finally, education faculty should possess a thorough understanding of the school contexts where TECs are placed and know the school-based personnel with whom their students are paired. Field experience arrangements should be part of a larger university-school partnership program, such as that proposed by the professional development school model, which benefit and enrich all involved – school-based faculty and students, university faculty and TECs (Darling Hammond, et al., 2005, pp. 414-417). Unfortunately, given current upheavals in U.S. school districts and universities, given unpredictability in both settings, given unwillingness to invest the supports needed to establish high quality professional development schools, these “should be” statements are often replaced by “can’t be”s. Where funds, resources and commitments are lacking, the parties involved in field experiences may settle, albeit reluctantly, for cooperation rather than collaboration. In these contexts, TECs may not be able to benefit from mutually reinforcing learning environments. University-based education faculty may not have opportunity to articulate the teacher preparation program’s conceptual framework and school-based personnel may not be able to offer TECs the field experiences anticipated by university faculty.

**The value of field experiences**

In Pennsylvania, the Department of Education now mandates a four stage field experience sequence. The stages include: observation where TECs visit a variety of school settings – urban, suburban, rural, high-performing and low-performing; exploration where TECs perform supervised work with small groups of students; pre-student teaching where TECs teach small groups of students and present lesson segments to a whole class under the supervision of a certified teacher; and student teaching where, under the direction of university faculty and over a twelve-week period, TECs take on the teaching rosters of school-based personnel – cooperating teachers who are “trained” by preparation program faculty.

Notwithstanding the less than favorable design and implementation conditions described above, TECs continue to participate in field experiences on their way to obtaining teaching degrees. We are certainly not suggesting that these field experiences be discarded. Rather, we are examining how field experiences can be incorporated into teacher education program designs in order to prepare TECs for successful teaching careers: how to make the experiences educative. If this is the desired learning outcome, then we place more relevance and value for field experiences in terms of rigorous, internal mental activity that the experiences engender afterwards rather than in situ (Dewey, 1938). Wrenn and Wrenn (2009) in their effort to integrate field and course work, offered a recommendation similar to ours: “Experience must be followed by reflective thought and an internal processing that links the experience with previous learning, transforming the learner’s previous understanding in some manner. Learning, therefore, takes place within a cycle that includes action, reflection and application” (p. 260).

**Description, analysis and interpretation of field experiences**

To provide a window onto field experiences from the perspectives of teacher educators and TECs as well as to illuminate possibilities for TECs to learn in and from practice at each developmental stage, we offer a sampling of what has occurred at East Stroudsburg University.

**Stage One – Observation: visits to a variety of school settings**

At this stage, students have just begun their university studies and are taking arts and science courses concurrently with education coursework. For their first education class, they must spend
fifteen hours observing in P-12 classrooms. Many of our TECs have always wanted to be teachers and are impatient to begin field experiences. None has ever visited a classroom other than as a student and now each is challenged to see classrooms as an aspiring teacher.

“Missy”
Nicole, a first year TEC, visited a small urban high school in a predominantly Latino neighborhood of Philadelphia with one of the authors. She and a group of her peers spent the day observing classes, interviewing teachers and participating in workshops organized by the high school faculty and administration. Upon return to campus, field trip participants shared their experiences during an open forum in class. One of the questions framing this discussion was: What surprised you? Responding to this prompt, Nicole stated that student-teacher relationships were much different from what she had herself experienced as a high school student, that in her suburban New York high school, the students treated teachers with much more respect than at the Philadelphia locale. When asked for the evidence upon which this contrast was based, Nicole reported that the students called their female teachers “Missy” and omitted their family names. Class discussion led Nicole to move beyond her own culturally determined formula for polite address to understand that there was another culturally determined formula, that for Latinos and for other ethnolinguistic minority groups in the U.S., using the teacher’s family name would be inappropriate! Without sharing her story and without the ensuing uncovering of these cultural differences, the TEC’s stereotypical thinking – that urban minority kids treat their teachers disrespectfully – would have been confirmed by this Stage One field experience.

Stage Two – Exploration: supervised work with small groups of students
At this stage, our TECs are continuing their arts and science courses and also taking an educational psychology course. For this second education course, they must tutor students for fifteen hours in a classroom or in an after-school setting. They are excited but anxious at this first opportunity to help with instruction.

“Teaching Is Not Telling, How Do I Interpret the Unexpected and What Do I Do About It?”
Jordan signed on to tutor in an on-campus after-school program for elementary school students living nearby in a low-income housing development. At his first tutorial session, Jordan had his student complete her homework assignment. In an initial tutoring journal entry, Jordan described how whenever his student hesitated, he explained what to do next. The journal prompts included: identify low points and use one or more educational theories to explain these low points; identify high points and use one or more educational theories to explain these high points; and present plans to improve future tutoring sessions, offering a rationale for these plans. Through the reflective journaling process, Jordan was led to reconsider the “teach by telling” method, to articulate and put into practice more learner-centered strategies embodied by techniques such as prompting, wait time and the novice-expert framework.

Later on in the semester, in a class discussion of TEC field experiences, Jordan expressed his frustration with the after-school program. When asked to elaborate, Jordan characterized his student as a “bad kid”, “blatantly defiant” with behavior that was a result of “poor upbringing”. His views triggered an animated classroom conversation about teacher-student relationships, trust-building over time, confronting pre-existing teacher and student biases, viewing student
behaviors as fixed versus modifiable, identifying root causes for student defiance, strategic responses, separating judgment of behaviors from judgment of the student, what to do when students “cross the line”, when to handle unexpected behaviors on your own and when to report them to a supervisor. The after-school program director attended the next class session as a guest presenter, continuing the problem setting/solving process with Jordan and his fellow TECs and offering additional explanations, insights and suggestions. In both of these Stage Two examples, the on-campus coursework activities rather than the field work by itself stimulated TEC development.

**Stage Three – Pre-student Teaching: teaching small groups of students and presenting lesson segments to the whole class under the supervision of a certified teacher**

Our third year TECs gain formal admittance into the teacher education program. For an education course dealing with instructional structures and strategies, they must spend forty hours in classrooms with teachers certified in the same areas that they themselves have targeted. They are eager to observe, to try out some of the lesson plans that they have prepared as course assignments and to use methods that they have been learning about.

“Toxicity in the Teacher’s Lounge”

Cory was paired with a high school English teacher in a district close to the university campus. Prior to his first visit, field experience “dos and don’ts” were reviewed in class. The guidelines included being careful about offering opinions on school policies and procedures, never publicly criticizing the mentor teacher, the student body, the administration, or the school; and remembering that TECs are guests in the schools and to act accordingly. During a subsequent discussion of the similarities and differences noted between field experiences and the ideas presented in the on-campus course, Cory shared his shock and dismay at the way in which teachers made so many disparaging remarks about students in the teacher’s lounge, calling them “lazy”, “unmotivated” and “stupid”. He noted that based upon the guidelines distributed and discussed at the beginning of the semester, he did not engage in any of these conversations and made it a point to avoid the teacher’s lounge except when having to use the photocopy machine. Cory added that his mentor teacher, herself a newcomer to the school, dreaded these toxic conversations and stayed away from the teacher’s lounge as much as possible herself. Cory’s pre-student teaching experience exposed him to an unanticipated school culture, but fortunately he had the benefit of prior on campus response guidelines. Cory’s comments led to accounts by other TECs of inappropriate, unprofessional teacher remarks at their field sites. A rich conversation ensued regarding standards for professional conduct, possible repercussions for lack of professionalism, teacher “burn-out” and what TECs should look for when making decisions regarding where to apply for teaching positions. Once again, on-campus in class discussion following this Stage Three field experience rather than the field experience itself fostered TEC development.

**Stage Four – Student Teaching: taking on the teaching rosters of school-based personnel under the direction of university faculty and supervised by cooperating teachers**

At last, our TECs reach their final semester of college studies. They will be spending most of the semester off campus in two different school settings, six weeks at one P-12 setting and six weeks at another. Filled with mixed emotions, they prepare to take on the teaching schedules of their cooperating teachers.
“How Do I Decide Upon Content Delivery?”

Megan was paired with an English/Language Arts middle school teacher. Megan’s mentor teacher adopted a rigid stance regarding what should take place in her classroom, even when the student teacher assumed the helm. She insisted that Megan continue her practice of students taking turns reading aloud in class page-by-page, chapter-by-chapter, stating that this was the only way to get her students to read an entire novel. Megan was worried and uncertain about what to do next. Should she follow her mentor teacher’s directions? After all, her mentor teacher would be evaluating her performance and possibly serve as a reference for eventual employment. Should she disregard what she had been taught in her university program about reading as an individual learner’s psycholinguistic interaction with text? Should she risk disapproval ratings from her university supervisor? Megan talked through the problem with fellow student teachers and with her university supervisor at an on-campus “practicum” seminar. All agreed that Megan should discuss content delivery with her field mentor and let the mentor know that one of her goals as a student teacher was to test out research-based methods learned in her university courses and that her university supervisor was expecting her to do so. Megan proceeded to offer her field mentor convincing arguments for an alternative instructional approach. Her field mentor agreed and, instead of the “read-aloud-in-class technique”, Megan had her students prepare written responses to teacher-made question sets with most of the reading assigned as homework. In class, Megan was able to shift the focus of instruction from the mechanics of oral reading to making meaning of the printed word. Her students shared literal, interpretive and evaluative responses that they had composed at home. They re-read excerpts from the story silently and discussed significance in terms of setting, character development, plot and theme. On campus, working with her peers and her university supervisor, Megan was empowered to set and solve a Stage Four field experience problem.

Reflections and recommendations

Extrapolating from this small but representative sample, it appears that field experiences may be insufficient for candidate growth and development, that field experiences may at times even be counterproductive, that teaching is not learned simply by putting TECs in P-12 classrooms or by expecting TECs to follow mentor teacher practices without question. The worth of TEC field experience lies in prior, concomitant and subsequent on-campus course time dedicated to conversation, reflection and mediation in the Vygotskian sense (1986 translation), where, in addition to engaging in field experiences and de-briefing with field mentors, TECs have opportunities to share stories from P-12 settings on campus, to analyze these experiences with fellow TECs and with university faculty and to consider as well as test out next steps. Through a recursive process of collaborative and critical inquiry, TECs develop understanding of classroom complexities as well as characteristics of diverse learners, realize instructional implications, acquire skills to address teaching and learning challenges both anticipated and unexpected, engage in reflection, learn to plan relentlessly and demonstrate perspicacity in justifying modifications in pedagogical approach. Moreover, it is this same cycle of inquiry that we model in our own teaching and that we hope will become part of our TECs’ modus operandi after graduation when they join the education workforce and that, in this manner, they will help to sustain robust professional learning communities at their schools.
Description, analysis and reflection based upon our practice suggest that numerous actions can be taken by TECs, school-based mentors and university faculty to maximize the value of field experiences.

**TECs can:**
Understand their personal prior P-12 schooling experiences as one lens and develop a new, more expansive and sharper “teacher” lens.
Strengthen their knowledge of teaching and learning theories.
Design and conduct authentic action research projects, testing teaching and learning theories in practice settings.
Develop a repertoire of teaching strategies.
Persist in personal teaching efficacy.
Reflect on field experiences in journals as well as with school-based mentors, university faculty and fellow TECs.
Participate in “critical friend” networks.

**School-based mentors can:**
Learn about and support the teacher preparation program vision, mission, goals, requirements, assignments and assessments.
Encourage TECs to connect university coursework themes including teaching and learning theories with the P-12 classroom.
Look for a win-win approach: the possibility for TECs to support instructional goals especially in their work with at-risk students.
Share, observe, critique and coach.
Model espoused teaching practices and professional dispositions.

**University faculty can:**
Learn about and support the P-12 school’s vision, mission, goals, strengths and challenges.
Communicate with P-12 field mentors and engage in true partnerships.
Bring P-12 presenters on campus – staff, students, parents and community activists.
Encourage TECs to connect P-12 classroom experiences with university coursework themes and with their own prior schooling experiences.
Use “in baskets”, case studies, problem-based scenarios, videos, and simulations to fuse theory and practice.
Share, observe, critique and coach.
Model espoused teaching practices and professional dispositions.

Ultimately, with knowledge of content, of pedagogy and from practice, TECs prepare their own unique teacher “toolkits”. However, by implementing these “can dos”, we envision a greater likelihood that teacher education candidates will transform otherwise fragmented, disconnected learning experiences into more coherent, integrated and steadfast understandings and graduate from our programs better prepared for lifelong teacher journeys.
References


Biographical notes

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