

FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS: IMPACT OF AN EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCE

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The purpose of this study was to explore the early field experiences of two family and consumer sciences (FCS) pre-service teachers. With the shortage of family and consumer sciences teachers and classroom management as the second most common reason for teachers leaving the profession, FCS education cannot afford to lose potential FCS teachers (Pickard, 2004; Tran, 2003). Providing early field experiences prior to the student teaching practicum for pre-service teachers can be a beneficial part of teacher education programs and help clarify teaching beliefs among pre-service teachers. Qualitative techniques were used to conduct and analyze individual interviews regarding early experiences. Implications for professional development and teacher education programs are discussed.

With classroom management issues being cited as the second most common reason for leaving the teaching profession and with the shortage of family and consumer science (FCS) teachers, common sense dictates that pre-service teachers be provided instruction to develop skills essential to success (Pickard, 2004; Tran, 2003). Essential skills include classroom management, teaching methods, and building confidence to sustain a teaching career. Particular to FCS are planning instruction for food and textiles laboratories, implementing the critical science perspective, and understanding the cognitive development of students.

A pre-service teacher is a student pursuing a degree to become a teacher at the postsecondary level. One way for pre-service teachers to practice teaching is through their student-teaching practicum. The first-hand experience and knowledge about the public school environment and secondary school students that are gained during practicum provide pre-service teachers with a frame of reference for the skills they are building. Many teacher educators and practicing teachers agree that university courses do not duplicate real life. Therefore, field experiences among pre-service teachers are often described as the most important part of teacher education programs. The term field experiences, denotes the entire range of in-school experiences, including structured observations, course-related field experiences, and student teaching.

Field experiences often are not meaningful and insightful for pre-service teachers, leaving them with an untrue perception of the duties of teaching. Hoy and Woolfolk (1990) found pre-service teachers are more likely to have unrealistic optimism about dealing with problems of teaching in general, and they will be confronted with reality shock as they begin teaching. Also, with student teaching usually occurring at the conclusion of formal classroom preparation and preceding the first full-time teaching job, pre-service students realize during this critical time either that teaching is their desired career path, teaching is not for them and opt out, or earn their degree and not teach, thus emphasizing the importance of early field experiences.

Pickard (2004) reported that practitioners who were in a ten-week student teaching program, agreed that a longer placement would be helpful. The mentor teachers especially

voiced the need for a longer placement for the pre-service teacher. This research strengthens the need for early field experiences by giving pre-service students more exposure and experience in the classrooms so they may have a better understanding of teaching. The purpose of this study was to explore early field experiences of family and consumer sciences pre-service teachers.

Early Field Experiences

Early field experiences can be defined as observing, assisting, or directly participating in a variety of formal and informal educational settings early in the pre-service student teacher education program. These experiences are distinct from the student teaching practicum because pre-service student teachers enter the classroom at the beginning of their teacher education program with little or no coursework in education. During this time, they are not expected to assume teaching responsibilities, but to observe, assist, and participate in as many activities as possible. Activities considered appropriate for participation include developing classroom materials, making short lesson presentations, assisting in laboratory demonstrations, and grading student work.

Research has suggested that early exposure to the teaching field, other than observations, gives pre-service students an opportunity to examine whether teaching is the career they want to pursue. In addition, early exposure helps to clarify beliefs about teaching. By providing early field experiences to teacher education students, they can become better teachers by articulating their purpose, choosing appropriate instructional strategies, and understanding high school students' social and cognitive background (Liston & Zeichner, 1991). All pre-service teaching experiences can contribute to the professional development of the pre-service teacher and as an opportunity to contribute to the profession more broadly.

One estimate suggested that the 100,000 teachers needed to fill vacancies left by retirees or teachers leaving the profession will be filled by new entrants to the profession (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Often new teachers do not feel prepared for the challenges of today's classrooms; only about 35% of recent graduates feel *very well prepared* to implement curriculum for performance standards (Quality Teacher, 2002). Most educators, including recent teacher education graduates, are not prepared for the challenge they face. Professional educators (secondary school teachers and administrators) "have strong convictions that the more real world classroom experience received by the new recruits to teaching, the better it will be for their ultimate decision to pursue a career in teaching and for the overall development of the teaching profession itself" (Bruckerhoff & Carlson, 1995, p. 433).

The No Child Left Behind legislation enacted in 2001, further emphasized teacher quality and accountability, aiming for a *highly qualified* teacher in every classroom who "knows what to teach, how to teach, and has command of the subject matter being taught" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, Para. 2). Pickard (2004) explained that not only must FCS teachers master the subject content knowledge, they also must have the ability to help prepare students for the mandated academic achievement tests. As schools are ranked based on student scores, FCS programs that do not reinforce and make application of the academic skills will become luxuries few school districts can afford to keep.

Most pre-service teachers, have only been on one side of the desk, as students and not on the other side as a teacher. Therefore, exposure to real teaching is beneficial for pre-service teachers early-on in their teacher education program. Benefits of early field experiences include: (a) provides an introduction of the realm of teaching; (b) exposure to students and the classroom; (c) preparation for the student teaching practicum; and (d) clarification of their career choice.

Collaboration

For pre-service teachers to have early field experiences and to complete their student-teaching practicum, partnerships between a university and a school (high school, elementary, etc.) must be formed. Goodlad (1994) recognized three key elements for the functions of partner schools: 1) preparing educators, 2) providing professional development, and 3) providing an exemplary education to K-12 students.

Effective partnerships must have clear and mutual goals. McGowan (1990) identified essential elements for effective collaboration which include: formalized administrative support; encourage mutual respect; input from all participants; perks to support the development of the collaboration; constant communication; and a sense of reality for the student-teacher.

In recognition of the increased demands being placed on the cooperating teacher, partnership incentives give the cooperating teacher perks for their time, energy, and effort. An example of a perk is a tuition waiver applied to a University class, thus providing professional development opportunities for that cooperating teacher.

As pre-service teachers participate in early field experiences as a teacher-in-training, cooperating teachers are their first exposure to the classroom. Thus, this initial entry into the classroom, the role of cooperating teachers is important as they are a model from which the pre-service teacher will learn. With early field experiences of pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers have a prominent role to ensure a positive experience so that pre-service teachers want to continue forward with their chosen career choice.

Cooperating teachers may perceive their role in early field experiences in different ways, for example, as a model, mentor, guide, or facilitator (Koskela & Ganser, 1998). Through the cooperating teacher's guidance during early field experiences, pre-service teachers are exposed to a variety of teaching activities, are shown effective teaching methodologies, and witness the daily routines of a teacher's role in the classroom and the school. Early field experiences are intended to provide the pre-service teachers with an introduction to the teaching profession.

As the cooperating teacher gives more responsibility to the pre-service teacher, collegiality can develop. The pre-service teacher will feel more comfortable and in turn take part ownership in the classroom. Anderson, Cole, Fischer, and Ingram (2000) found the more time spent in the classroom, the pre-service teacher's confidence levels about the realm of teaching increase. Furthermore, pre-service teachers are simultaneously learning subject matter and pedagogy skills at the university while participating in a real classroom under supervision of a veteran teacher. Thus, a cooperating teacher and pre-service teacher can collaborate on ways to teach content and how to handle student behavior. Ideally, the relationship would help the cooperating teacher and the pre-service teacher develop reflective practice (Stern, 1997).

Cooperating teachers provide a setting for a pre-service teacher's initial exposure to the teaching role. The benefits of working with cooperating teachers early in their teacher education program are that it provides pre-service teachers with a role model and a professional contact.

Theoretical Framework: Reflective Practice

Wolf stated, "Reflection is what allows us to learn from our experiences: it is an assessment of where we have been and where we want to go next" (as cited in Schon, 1996). Students involved in early field experiences begin to think of themselves as future teachers and have early opportunities to collect authentic experiences they can use as a foundation for the theory they will be exposed to in future education courses.

Reflective practice, introduced by Schon (1996), is a term often used in education pedagogy. It is a continuous process from a personal perspective of considering critical incidents within one's life experiences. As defined by Schon, reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline. The primary benefit of reflective practice for teachers is a deeper understanding of their own teaching style and ultimately, greater effectiveness as a teacher. Not only pre-service teachers, but all teachers should reflect on each class in terms of activities, content, and teaching strategies to improve themselves as a teacher but more importantly, to ensure transfer of knowledge to the students.

Research Question

What are the early field experience reflections of family and consumer sciences (FCS) pre-service teachers?

Method

Participants and Pre-service Experience

Two female FCS pre-service teachers assisted a FCS secondary teacher in one course for three consecutive days. Both pre-service teachers were enrolled in their second semester in a master's degree alternative certification program at a Midwestern university. The classroom experience involved a lesson presentation, monitoring and managing students, and compilation of grades.

Data Collection and Procedure

Qualitative data from informal interviews were collected individually from two FCS pre-service teachers. The purpose was to gain in-depth insight into their experiences in the classroom. The interview questions were derived from the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium Standards (1992) for new and beginning teachers. Each interview was approximately thirty minutes in length. Interviews were conducted by the primary investigator. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed for themes. Interview questions included:

- Describe the perceived benefits of participating in this early field experience.
- What did you perceive as challenging?
- What did you not expect from your experience in the classroom?
- Do you feel the lessons in your methods course mirror what goes on in the classroom? Is your teacher education program adequately preparing you for your role as a future teacher?
- From this experience, what will you seek to improve on or want to know more about?
- Did this early field experience clarify your desire to teach?

Results and Discussion

This study explored early field experiences of two FCS pre-service teachers. A qualitative technique of interviewing provided the responses to the questions.

Both interviewees appreciated the opportunity to have an experience with real students. They suggested that instructional materials are best tested in a real classroom. For example, one interviewee stated the following.

I was excited about having direct contact with the students. Even the best-designed lesson plans can read well, but are perceived differently when delivered in the classroom. I was looking forward to the opportunity to ‘think on my feet.’ I have learned that it is impossible to anticipate every question or reaction.

This response supports what professional educators indicate for pre-service teachers. The more real classroom experience received by new recruits to teaching, the better it will be for their ultimate decision to pursue a career in teaching and for the overall development of the teaching profession itself (Bruckerhoff & Carlson, 1995). By providing early field experiences, pre-service teachers can practice choosing appropriate instructional strategies and have a better understanding of high school students’ social and cognitive background (Liston & Zeichner, 1991).

Pre-service students involved in early field experiences begin to think of themselves as future teachers. Social modeling occurs during the practicum, in that the pre-service teacher wants to blend into the class based on the expectations of the cooperating teacher. One challenge for pre-service teachers is stepping into an established classroom. One pre-service teacher described her challenge.

Knowing what the classroom teacher/supervisor expected was difficult. It is difficult to step into a classroom and complete their teaching style or compliment the way they handle their students. I’ve always felt that it will be easier when classroom management, attitude, goals, and objectives are mine.

Research suggests that pre-service teachers are more likely to have unrealistic optimism about dealing with problems of teaching. Encountering classroom challenges during this training time can empower the pre-service teacher with the feeling of self-efficacy. For example, one interviewee explained her perceptions.

First, presenting a lesson that students’ would be interested [in] and enjoy was a challenge. Secondly, how students perceived me as an interim teacher, meaning did they take me seriously. Lastly, the challenge of classroom management, more specifically with student discipline ranging from talking to being defiant.

From this experience, the pre-service teacher did not view herself as a classroom teacher yet. One pre-service teacher explained what she did not expect from her classroom experience. “I did not expect to be nervous or anxious as I was. I did not expect the students to refuse to answer questions or respond, and...there were no surprises the students were very attentive and courteous.”

Often, lessons in university based methods course do not mirror real life in the classroom, thus leaving pre-service students with an untrue perception of teaching. One interviewee reflected on her teacher education program.

The method techniques course within my discipline was a good preparation course. As far as the overall teacher education program in preparing me to teach was not as beneficial, the course content helped with understanding why students act they way they do, but not how to manage students. You do not know what it is really like until you step in the classroom.

The other interviewee shared her experience in the teacher education program.

Methods classes reflect a perfect situation with well-behaved students, ready to learn, and more often than not this is not the case. Methods classes are a good place to begin, but perhaps taking the same lesson to a real teaching situation would reveal much more to the ‘teacher in training.’ Teacher education students could benefit greatly from early direct

exposure to students in a classroom setting, for example developing ways to present information, ideas, or concepts would be more effectively written if real students were the subjects of motivation.

Early field experiences can provide pre-service teachers with an early opportunity to collect authentic experiences they can use as a foundation for the theory they will be exposed to in future education courses. One interviewee described an area to continue further professional development.

I will definitely learn more about technology. Today, students know more about computers and their applications. I feel if I knew more about technology I could effectively incorporate technology into my classroom, to make the lessons more interactive; therefore, I feel my lessons are limited because I do not feel comfortable integrating technology. Also, teachers are required to develop teacher web pages for their classes. In my program of study, I do not have the time to fit in another course, so I will seek additional coursework at a junior college to learn about web page design and technology in general.

The first-hand experience and knowledge about the public school environment and secondary school students that are gained during practicum provide the pre-service teachers with a frame of reference for the skills they are building. One interviewee commented.

I am very curious about learning styles as they apply to each individual student, I anticipate trying to provide the information in customized formats as much as possible for my students. I also look forward to seeing a few of the results of my teaching, for example the lesson on “dressing for success” was great and as the students seek jobs it would be wonderful to get feedback on how they applied the information that I presented.

This early field experience was designed to give the pre-service teachers the opportunity to observe and work with teachers and students; to become better acquainted with the roles of a family and consumer sciences teacher. Research has suggested that early field experience is beneficial for pre-service students to examine and clarify their teaching desire. One interviewee stated.

I enjoyed the experience very much, as an example gaining a response from a quiet and withdrawn student was a small instant reward. I look forward to working directly with students and feel honored to maybe influence tomorrow’s adults as an FCS teacher.

The confidence levels of the realm of teaching increase as a pre-service teacher continues through the practicum (Anderson, et al., 2000). A positive relationship results as a pre-service teacher spends additional time in the classroom. One interviewee explained her classroom experience in a positive way. “Yes, any classroom experience is beneficial. This experience has given me the confidence in knowing I can instruct a class.”

Conclusions and Implications

The primary benefit of reflective practice for pre-service teachers in this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the teaching realm and ultimately, greater effectiveness as a teacher. With federal and state mandates, increased existing teacher attrition rates, and the decline of enrollments in family and consumer sciences university programs, the profession cannot afford to lose potential FCS teacher candidates.

The study confirmed, based on the reflection responses that incorporating early field experiences during pre-service teacher preparation is beneficial. University-based methods

classes are important in practicing teaching, but providing students real teaching experience would reveal much more to the *teacher in training*.

The reflection process identified teaching skills areas the pre-service teachers should target for development. One skill to develop is the knowledge and use of technology in the classroom. The incorporation of technology in the classroom includes devices such as smart-boards, personal response gaming systems (PRS), audio enhancements, educational software, and interactive websites. Our students have grown up in the technology age, as teachers we need to embrace and incorporate technology into the classroom to enhance the lesson by applying the content to real life without stepping outside the classroom. Additionally, it is becoming common as part of a teacher's responsibility to develop and maintain a teacher's webpage. Parents and students can keep abreast of assignments and activities in the class and provides a communication tool through email and conversation at home. Pre-service teachers need exposure to technology and how to integrate technology into the classroom in their teacher education program.

Exposing pre-service teacher students to the classroom before the student teaching practicum with more than passive activities (such as observations) can help pre-service teachers gain a clearer understanding of the classroom. Tran (2003) cited classroom management issues as the second most common reason for leaving the teaching profession, and this same issue was a concern raised among the pre-service teachers. By providing classroom opportunities for pre-service teachers, they can become better teachers by articulating their purpose, choosing appropriate classroom management strategies, and understanding high school students' social and cognitive background (Liston & Zeichner, 1991).

Producing highly competent FCS teachers is essential to the survival of the profession. Through this early field experience each pre-service teacher gained confidence in their ability and role of educating students. Preparing well-qualified, confident teachers for the challenges of today's classroom is the task facing teacher preparation programs (Pickard, 2004). The more exposure to the classroom pre-service teachers encounter, the better they can further target teaching skills areas for development throughout their teacher education program, thus building their confidence.

This study afforded the opportunity to bridge together a university teacher educator, a secondary teacher, and pre-service teachers, also promoting the development of university-school partnerships. The bridge creates a win-win situation in that two pre-service teachers gained valuable experience by entering the classroom early in their program, the cooperating teacher participated in professional development, the university developed a relationship with the school, and the high school students were exposed to additional application knowledge through another instructional approach.

The implementation of early field experience in collaboration with the university and school is imperative in the development of a well-rounded teacher candidate. The relationship of the student teacher and cooperating teacher is important in facilitating the student's development. By providing meaningful field experiences in conjunction with the partnering school and university, the teacher candidates are better prepared for the rigors of teaching in the 21st century.

Parents, the general public and educational leaders recognize that the quality of teaching determines the quality of education. Overwhelmingly, Americans believe that knowing *how to teach* is more important than knowing *what to teach* (Hart & Teeter, 2002). By providing *early* field experiences prior to the student teaching practicum for pre-service teachers can be a beneficial part of the teacher education programs. In addition, early field experiences can provide

the opportunity to become better acquainted with the roles of a family and consumer sciences teacher. Involving pre-service teachers early in the classroom is one step to take in improving teacher quality and increase the longevity of a FCS teaching career.

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