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Collaborating With University Faculty and District Partners to Provide Meaningful Field Experiences for Pre-service Teachers

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The most effective teacher preparation programs require candidates to spend extensive time in the field practicing skills related to coursework (Darling-Hammond, 2010). When a candidate is provided opportunities to work alongside expert teachers to put coursework into practice, the candidate receives support and guidance along the way making he/she better equipped to problem solve, engage and impact student achievement. Effective teachers are the most influential factor on student achievement; students exposed to an ineffective teacher for three or more years, will never catch up academically (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Madda, Skinner & Schultz, 2012). Teacher candidates need to be exposed to effective teachers in the field in order to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to impact student achievement.

Given a young workforce, the turnover in education and the increasing diversity of classrooms, the effectiveness of teacher preparation is at the forefront of debate. With the focus turning to performance in the field, arguments are made as to the value of university-based teacher preparation programs. Much of the discussion has led to an increase in practice-based, practice-focused, or practice-centered teacher education; commonly referred to as practicums, in-service, field experiences and/or clinical experiences as a means of increasing teacher readiness and in turn student achievement (Zeichner, 2012).

University teacher preparation programs have long been the authoritative source of knowledge regarding pedagogy. The hierarchy that exists between universities, practitioners and

community members puts relationships at risk. Those invested in the needs of pre-service teachers should develop collaborative partnerships (Zeichner, 2010). Over the past decade, PK-12 settings have recognized the increased need for collaboration through their use of communities of practice, professional learning communities and through an increase in team planning. Sleeter (2014) highlights the gaps within the university system in her call for more collaboration on research agendas that link teacher education to student achievement. For example at many universities, practitioners, or recently retired practitioners, supervise clinical experiences. Although this supports the relationship and connection between practitioner and the university, these individuals have no authority to participate in decisions that impact program development or change (Bullough, Draper, Smith, & Burrell, 2004; Zeichner, 2012; Zeichner, 2010). Closing this gap and validating relationships amongst stakeholders has the power to shift research to build a knowledge base for teacher preparation. The purpose of this article is to describe programmatic changes that have led to increased time in the field, more support for candidates and a decrease in concerns at clinical practice (or student teaching).

One University's Collaboration with District Partners

In Fall 2012, 11% (of 157) clinical practice candidates were in jeopardy of unsuccessfully completing clinical practice. Reasons stemmed from a lack of experience in classroom settings and included inability to find rhythm in the school day and an overall lack of understanding of what teaching entailed. These factors impacted classroom management, instructional strategies and relationships with students. In Spring 2013, 10% (of 192) candidates were in jeopardy, and in Fall 2013, the candidates in jeopardy jumped to 14% (of 142). Given the size of the program, the respective percentages represented 18-20 candidates per semester. Districts were voicing concerns, placements were becoming difficult, and candidates needed a more successful end to their

program. After multiple meetings and exchanges of ideas, the university began to work internally to revamp the current program and collaborate with districts to find common solutions that could benefit all:

1. Retrieved information from twelve metropolitan partner districts
2. Aligned data and concerns with research based practices
3. Increased time in the field and blocked courses
4. Hired instructional coaches to bridge theory and practice in the field
5. Created and aligned performance based assessments to each course
6. Piloted and implemented a collaborative model at clinical practice

The new model focused on the collaborative relationship between teacher candidates, district partners and faculty, which led to increased time in the field, coaching prior to clinical practice and the use of co-teaching strategies.

Increased time in the field and blocked courses

As a result of the data, this led to collaboration within the teacher education department to determine better ways to meet the needs of candidates. Faculty met to discuss course expectations, field expectations and how to support increased time in the field. A scope and sequence was developed in order for experiences to build in time and complexity. Given that placing candidates in the field is a joint effort between the university, district partnerships and partner schools, faculty needed to be open to the needs of the school as well.

One concern from school partners, with the previous model, surrounded the “drop in” lessons where candidates came in one day a week for a few hours over the course of several weeks. Candidates never saw the transition of lessons from day-to-day. Furthermore, often the time available was a Friday afternoon and the experience was primarily observation based with no university support in the field. This experience did not prepare candidates for teaching diverse

learners in a PK-12 classroom, nor did it provide the school with the support and consistency needed. As a result, the university began to look at block scheduling. This allowed for a day-to-day experience tied to multiple course sections. It resulted in more collaboration and co-teaching opportunities for faculty, candidates and district partners. Local districts continue to support the efforts by matching master teachers to the expectations outlined for the field experience. The collaboration between the school district partners and the university continually informs and improves practice, allowing for rigorous and cumulative experiences for candidates (Appendix A).

Much work was put into developing strong partnerships with area school districts, and it was clear that their input in this change process was critical to sustaining partnerships and improving the program. The university is fortunate to be a part of a group of human resource representatives from twelve area school districts, along with two educational service units. This was an ideal platform to discuss the necessary changes in field experiences and to elicit support and partnership in the process. Once the partnership was formed at this level, the university was able to work with specific building administrators and teachers to form strong partnerships and high-quality placements for teacher candidates.

Hired instructional coaches to bridge theory and practice in the field

Another discussion throughout the process, focused around allowing more time for coached field experiences early in the program. In education, coaching is used to help educators make informed decisions. These decisions are tied to classroom practice and promote continuous self-assessment. A cycle of observation, action and reflection can improve instruction when individualized, collaborative and frequent feedback is utilized (Vartuli, Bolz and Wilson 2014). This is why coaching is an increasing part of the development of new teachers and the professional

development of veteran teachers. If a teacher develops the skills to be a reflective, data-driven, action-oriented educator, the practice becomes part of who they are instead of what they do.

With the increased time in the field, came a need for increased support for candidates and classroom teachers. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996), "...learning cannot occur in college classrooms divorced from schools" (p. 31). To support the need for guided and supervised field experiences, four instructional coaches were hired to work alongside faculty. The coaches attended classes with candidates, modeled co-teaching and supported candidate development of continuous self-assessment. The instructional coach serves as a mentor and support for pre-service teachers to help build a bridge between the theory taught at the university and the application of these practices in the field. The role of the instructional coach allows pre-service candidates to apply their learning while receiving feedback in a supportive, non-evaluative manner. In addition to supporting pre-service teachers in the field, the instructional coach also serves as a resource for P – 12 partner schools. The coach works collaboratively with the building administration as well as mentor teachers to ensure that university expectations are implemented and questions or concerns are addressed in a timely manner.

Created and aligned performance based assessments to each course

Another important conversation surrounded the need for field experiences to be tied to course grades to ensure teacher candidates are held accountable and meet high expectations for professionalism. Throughout the program, candidates are provided multiple, supported opportunities to connect theory to practice. These field experiences provide time for candidates to apply their learning within a classroom setting. These experiences are tied to 30% of the course grade and ensure the complexities of teaching at one level are met before continuing to the next. Each candidate spends a minimum of 146-coached hours in the field prior to beginning clinical

practice. The performance assessment at each level has been scaled back from the one used at clinical practice so the language and expectations stay consistent and candidates developmentally improve within the field. If candidates are consistently meeting the target behaviors throughout the field-based practicums, the goal is decreased concerns during clinical practice and higher candidate performance in the field.

Piloted and implemented a collaborative model at clinical practice

The collaboration between school district partners and the university continues to inform and improve practice, allowing for rigorous and cumulative experiences for candidates and continues to support the shared belief that every child deserves a great teacher. After much discussion and a pilot in two school districts, clinical practice moved to a collaborative model this year. This was a direct outcome and response to district concern, input and collaboration. Collaborative frameworks support the development of a common language. Team teaching, cooperative teaching, and co-teaching are among the most successful collaborative models (Austin, 2001; Fennick & Liddy, 2001; Friend, Reising & Cook, 1993; McKenzie, 2009; Rice & Zigmond, 2000; Fisch & Bennett, 2013). In recent years, there has been a shift in the use of co-teaching during clinical experiences, especially during clinical practice. Co-teaching is defined as two or more teachers working together in the same classroom, sharing responsibility for student learning (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Champerlain & Shamberger 2010; Badiali & Titus, 2010). There are seven strategies: one teach, one observe; one teach, one assist; parallel teaching; station teaching; differentiated teaching; alternative teaching, and team teaching. The strategies frame the expectations and yield conversations about common practice. For decades clinical practice, has taken a “sink or swim” approach where the pre-service teacher observes for a few weeks, then takes over the classroom. This 16-week, all-day experience immerses teacher candidates in the

PK-12 environment. In the collaborative model, the cooperating teacher and the teacher candidate are both actively engaged in the planning, instruction and assessment for the classroom through the use of co-teaching strategies. This allows for increased collaboration and reflection on teaching and learning. Parity is encouraged from the start of the experience as candidates are seen as equals to the cooperating teacher in the eyes of students.

As the candidates gain experience, he/she takes the lead in planning, instruction and assessment. The cooperating teacher might take on the role of “one teach, one observe” to provide feedback on classroom management and instructional strategies, or take on another role within the co-teaching strategies. This shift in roles allows time for independent practice and “solo” teaching for candidates, allowing the cooperating teacher to remain present, provide constructive feedback and ensure student needs are met.

Unique to the experience is the Team Development Workshop. The intent of the workshop is to foster professional relationships and develop common understandings of the co-teaching model between cooperating teachers, university supervisors and teacher candidates. It also allows time for the team to begin collaboratively planning for the semester.

Impact

Without collaboration between the university and school practitioners, the practice of allowing candidates to learn and apply instructional strategies in classrooms lacks the necessary elements of a teacher inquiry community. The ambiguity in current practice leads to decreased student achievement and a lack of retention. A focused approach nurtures the development of a professional vision (Zeichner, 2012). Candidates have more successful experiences when both the university supervisor and the cooperating teacher share a similar perspective and send a similar message regarding performance (Fernandez and Erbilgin, 2009). Unfortunately, the relationship

between PK-12 practitioner and pre-service teacher is often conceptualized based on the practitioner’s own experiences. Increasing conversations and valuing district input leads to a growth model. Without collaboration to identify needs, clarify expectations and support all aspects of a field experience, the chasm between universities and PK-12 practitioners will continue to widen. The creation of a professional vision with a common language will bridge multiple contexts and communities.

<u>Semester</u>	<u>% in Jeopardy</u>	<u>Total number of Candidates</u>
Fall 2012	11%	157
Spring 2013	10%	192
Fall 2013	14%	142
Fall 2014	4%	159
Spring 2015	4%	128

Conclusion

As numbers increase in enrollment, the challenge of supporting candidates while in the field and continuing to grow and maintain partnerships with schools that support the increased enrollment numbers poses a new challenge. The commitment and collaboration of partnership schools is a vital asset of our teacher preparation program. Without this, the programmatic changes that led to increased time in the field, more support for candidates and a decrease in concerns at clinical practice would not have been possible.

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