

2022

Early Childhood Supervision: Tensions in the Advancement of Developmentally Appropriate and Social-Justice Oriented Practice

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Recommended Citation

Baker, S. J., Mowrey, S. C., & Cunningham, D. (2022). Early Childhood Supervision: Tensions in the Advancement of Developmentally Appropriate and Social-Justice Oriented Practice. *Journal of Educational Supervision*, 5 (2). <https://doi.org/10.31045/jes.5.2.3>

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Journal of Educational Supervision

30–41

Volume 5, Issue 2, 2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31045/jes.5.2.3>
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/jes/>

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Abstract

This case examines the complex interactions among university faculty, teacher candidates, and school-based mentor teachers during supervision. In early childhood, among other skills and dispositions, the use of developmentally appropriate practice and an equity focus are important to the overall advancement of teacher candidates' practice. However, supervisors do not have oversight of the classrooms in which early childhood candidates are placed for field experiences. In some cases, teacher candidates may be expected to conform to or demonstrate practices themselves which are not developmentally appropriate, or which are inequitable. What is the role of the supervising faculty member in these cases, and how can the supervisor navigate the relationship with mentor teacher and host school, while also supporting appropriate and equitable professional growth in the teacher candidate?

Keywords

supervision; teacher education; early childhood education

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Introduction

Practicum and student teaching have been identified as the most important aspects of teacher preparation and possibly the most problematic (Goodlad, 1990). This emphasis on clinical practices creates a crucial need for the development of school-university partnerships to serve as the venue for shared responsibility in the preparation of the teaching workforce.

Teacher educators understand the importance of selecting practicum placements that offer the best conditions for learning. A good practicum placement is one where the essence of practicum is understood by all the participants and there is a commitment to facilitating an effective and valuable practicum experience. Good practicums are authentic, provide diverse teaching and learning experiences (social and cultural diversity, special education needs, marginalized contexts, and a range of age groups) and welcome a community of practice (Jacobs & Burns, 2021). Studies emphasize the importance of strengthening the interactions and cooperation between teacher educators, teacher candidates, and mentor teachers to create a more coherent community of practice within which practicums can take place (Waddle & Vartuili, 2015). Researchers acknowledge the importance of connecting theoretical and practical learning in teacher education (Knight, 2015). A significant body of research indicates that practicums provide a platform for students to connect theoretical learning to educational practices (e.g., Gourgiotou, 2018; Knight, 2015; Van Shagen Johnson et al., 2017). However, depending on the type of collaboration between universities and practicum placements, practicums can either enhance the theory-to-practice connection or further widen the gap between the two (Van Shagen Johnson et al., 2017). In the study of practicum placements, researchers have used Aristotle's concepts of *episteme* and *phronesis* to explain the divide between theory and practice in teacher education (Cheng et al., 2012). *Episteme* refers to the scientific understanding of a problem, while *phronesis* approaches contextual problems through the use of practical insights rather than scientific knowledge. Unlike *episteme*, which develops through scientific inquiry, *phronesis* develops as teachers assess situations and react to consequences in their daily encounters. It is believed that teaching requires both *episteme* and *phronesis* (Onnismaa et al., 2015). Some have argued that teacher preparation programs rely too heavily on theory (Knight, 2015), which create a divide between higher education and school partners rather than building collaborative relationships for teacher candidates to develop the competencies needed to be a successful teacher.

In a recent literature review investigating early childhood education practicums, Scandinavian researchers identified three focus areas of research: (1) teacher candidates' learning processes in their practicums, (2) operational and pedagogical practicum arrangements, and (3) the social and collaborative constructs of practice and learning (Matengu et al., 2021). The review consisted of 84 research studies that included perspectives of all constituents. However, there were no studies that focused on the incongruity between practicum site practice and the early childhood teacher preparation program. Using a *phronesis* approach, this case study presents a situation in which the practicum site practices were not consistent with school policy as well as presenting an experience that was at odds with the developmentally appropriate practices taught by the teacher education program.

Background

Midwest University was founded as a Normal School in the early 1900s with its primary purpose of preparing public school teachers for the state and local region. Midwest University is in the city of Manchester and serves over 20,000 undergraduate students. While student diversity, including international student populations have changed in the past five years, the institution is still a predominantly white institution (PWI) of higher education. At present, 19.7% percent of the undergraduates at Midwest University are students from marginalized populations with 4.8% identified as Black or African American, 5.6% as Hispanic or Latino, 3.1% as Asian, 0.4% as Indigenous, and 5.8% identified as more than one race with the remaining 80.3% of the student body identifying as White. The teacher education program at Midwest University continues to be well-regarded in the region for its teacher education programs. Midwest University graduates and certifies the majority of teachers in the state.

Early Childhood Program at Midwest University

The Early Childhood (EC) program at Midwest University certifies teacher candidates to be a teacher of early childhood, certified to teach birth through third grade. This aligns with the National Association of Education of Young Children (NAEYC) definition of early childhood education (NAEYC, 2020). The EC program averages 225 teacher candidates annually. All the EC faculty are women who identify as White and middle-class. Some of the EC faculty are graduates from the EC program at Midwest University while other faculty are new to Midwest University and the city of Manchester. The EC program faculty have begun completing yearly reviews each summer to better understand program graduates' experiences, as well as their knowledge and skills. Revisions to courses in the program have been more intentional through the yearly review process, including focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) knowledge and skills within all courses instead of relying on only one multicultural education course.

The EC program at Midwest University relies on Manchester Public Schools (MPS) for the majority of the practicum placements for EC teacher candidates. Every course in the EC program requires a practicum experience for EC teacher candidates, so EC faculty teach and supervise EC teacher candidates in the practicum placements. The mentor teachers working with EC teacher candidates are also often alumni from Midwest University's EC program. Collaboration and partnership between Midwest University EC faculty and MPS mentor teachers is limited due to various factors. One limiting factor is finding time to meet for planning and collaboration. Both Midwest University EC faculty and MPS mentor teachers teach during the day. MSP mentor teachers also have limited planning time for their own teaching. The EC faculty and MSP mentor teachers have yet to find a way to work around this challenge without using time outside of MSP mentor teachers' contract time to collaborate. This limitation leads to another limiting factor of the inability to develop authentic relationships while working together to support EC teacher candidate's growth and development for the early childhood teaching profession. Observation visits by EC faculty during EC teacher candidates' practicum experiences becomes the only means for collaboration; however, the observation visits allow mostly for cursory hellos and thank yous between the EC faculty and MSP mentor teachers.

Teaching Observations of Early Childhood Teacher Candidates at Midwest University

Teaching observations of EC teacher candidates occur throughout the EC program at Midwest University. Teaching observations are observed lessons that are planned by the EC teacher candidate and interactions of the EC teacher candidates in their practicum classroom with early childhood students. Practicum experiences give EC teacher candidates the opportunity to practice and apply their learning from coursework with an experienced mentor teacher. Every practicum experience is connected to a course within the EC program. EC teacher candidates are responsible for planning and teaching lessons during their practicum experiences that demonstrate mastery of EC program course objectives. EC faculty observe EC teacher candidates teaching, then debrief with EC teacher candidates immediately after the taught lesson. The debrief is a learning conversation between the EC faculty and EC teacher candidates. EC faculty support EC teacher candidates' learning and development through the observation of teaching and debrief conversation. Increasingly within the conferring process, EC faculty are noticing a disconnect. More and more during the debrief the EC faculty hear, "my mentor teacher told me to do that" or "my mentor teacher told me I had to teach this lesson and teach it this way". The EC faculty have begun to question how EC teacher candidates will be able to implement best practices for their own students, if they are seeing and modeling teaching practices that are not developmentally appropriate let alone anti-bias, anti-racist, and culturally sustaining (Kleinrock, 2021; Paris et al., 2017). The EC faculty are becoming increasingly concerned, because course content EC teacher candidates are learning is not able to be seen in their practicum placements by their mentor teacher nor does the placement provide EC teacher candidates with an opportunity to practice their learning.

City of Manchester

The city of Manchester is considered a mid-size city with a population of almost 200,000 people. The median household income is \$36,900 (US Census, 2019). The poverty rate is 23% in Manchester (US Census, 2019). Over 90% of the population in Manchester has a high school degree and 27% of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher. The city demographics are similar to Midwest University. At present, 13.9% of the city of Manchester are from marginalized populations with 4.4% identifying as Black or African American, 4.3% identifying as Hispanic or Latino, 2.1% as Asian, 0.7% Indigenous, and 5.8% identifying as two or more races with the remaining 86.1% of Manchester's population identifying as White.

Manchester Public Schools

Manchester Public School (MPS) is in the city of Manchester and is the largest school district in the state serving over 23,000 students. The school district comprises four early childhood centers (preschool aged students), thirty-five elementary schools, ten middle schools, and five high schools. Magnet programs, available throughout the district through a lottery application process, provide unique learning programs (e.g. fine arts academy, leadership academy) for students aligned to state standards. MPS has the International Baccalaureate (IB) program at many schools, including two high schools. At present, 8.8% identify as Black or African American, 8.7% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 3.1% students identify as Asian, 0.75% identify as Indigenous, and 6.1% identify as two or more races with the remaining 72.1% identify as White.

Teachers in MPS have an average of 12.2 years of experience with 62.7% of teachers holding an advanced degree.

Case Narrative

An EC teacher candidate, Emily had to cancel her scheduled observation visit when she became ill with strep. Dr. Brown, one of the EC faculty at Midwest University, rescheduled the observation visit with Emily; she realized the rescheduling of Emily's observation would allow her to stay in the classroom longer than twenty minutes- the typical length of a teaching observation in the EC program. Emily had been placed in a kindergarten classroom. The rescheduled visit was taking place during Thanksgiving week. Dr. Brown, a former kindergarten teacher, especially enjoyed observing EC teacher candidates in kindergarten classrooms.

Kindergarten Observation Visit

Dr. Brown entered the kindergarten classroom noting the quietness of 21 kindergarteners at 9:00 a.m. on a Tuesday morning during Thanksgiving week. The quiet room was atypical to not only the other EC teacher candidates' observations, but also her own kindergarten teaching experience. Emily was slowly walking about the classroom monitoring seat work being completed by the kindergarten students. Emily noticed Dr. Brown's arrival in the classroom and found a copy of her lesson plan. While giving the lesson plan to Dr. Brown, Emily said, "I'm feeling so nervous about this observation, Dr. Brown." Dr. Brown smiled and reassured her by stating, "I still get nervous when I'm observed. This is about learning and developing your knowledge and skills to be a great early childhood teacher. You're going to be okay." The mentor teacher, Ms. Smith directed Dr. Brown to a teacher chair that was situated away from the kindergarten students who had begun to gather on the carpet area of the classroom for Emily's lesson. Dr. Brown said to Ms. Smith, "Oh, no thanks. I like to sit with the children on the floor when observing EC teacher candidates teach." Dr. Brown noted the seat work the students had been completing was a coloring sheet with the phrase *First Thanksgiving* along with an image of people and Pilgrims standing around an extended table overflowing with foods, including a large cornucopia with pumpkins, apples, and squash.

While Dr. Brown situated herself on the carpet area she noted Ms. Smith had pulled aside one of the boys. She heard Ms. Smith say, "Isaiah. You were the last one cleaned up, again. I've told you before that you need to be quicker to the carpet area for lessons." Dr. Brown noted Isaiah's appearance; he appeared to be bi-racial with his Afro-textured hair and skin tone. There were two girls in the class that appeared to also be bi-racial or identify as Black or African American, but Isaiah appeared to be the only boy. Dr. Brown counted twenty-one children in the classroom; noting nine girls and twelve boys by appearance.

Emily began the phonics lesson by reading a book to the kindergarteners about the letter "w". The story was repetitive- *What begins with w? Water. Water begins with w. What begins with w? Window. Window begins with w.* The story provided the students with knowledge about things that start with the letter "w". Dr. Brown noted some of the children were joining Emily for the repetitive parts of the book and some were not. Isaiah began to sway his upper body while sitting on the carpet. Without warning his swaying bumped a boy sitting next to him, who quickly

turned to Isaiah and loudly said “Stop Isaiah. Stop touching me.” Before Emily could address Isaiah or the other boy, Ms. Smith asked Isaiah to step into the hallway with her. All eyes were on Isaiah as he walked looking down at his feet behind Ms. Smith to the hallway. A few moments later, Isaiah returned to his spot on the carpet area while Emily was continuing her lesson.

Emily had been explaining the worksheet the students would be completing at their table seat. “First, draw a picture of something that starts with the letter “w”. Then, write a sentence about your drawing. When you’re done, you will turn in your paper to the teacher table and can finish your Thanksgiving coloring sheet. Ready. Set. Go!” Some students ran back to their seats while some skipped and some even walked. Isaiah had stood up and walked up to Emily still sitting in the read-aloud chair and said, “There’s a “w” in my last name.” Emily told Isaiah, “Nice job, buddy. Now, it’s time to work at our tables.” Isaiah walked back to his assigned seat at the table. Ms. Smith called out, “Kindergarteners. This is work time. We are quiet when we work.” Emily glanced over to Dr. Brown as she also got up from the carpet area and made eye contact with her. She was not sure what to do next, but she knew Dr. Brown did not approve of kindergarten students being quiet while they worked. Emily knew from learning with Dr. Brown during classes this semester at Midwest University that Dr. Brown believed young children made sense of their world by being social with each other, which meant students, especially kindergarteners, needed to be talking to each other during their work time.

Dr. Brown had been thinking about the challenges the EC teacher candidates face when completing their practicum experiences with mentor teachers like Ms. Smith while she got up from the carpet area. Ms. Smith was an experienced teacher- this was her fifteenth year of teaching. She had knowledge from her classroom experiences to share with EC teacher candidates placed in her classroom for their practicum experience. Dr. Brown, like Emily, was also not sure what to do next during the observation visit. Did she remind Ms. Smith about the students being five and six years old, along with developmentally appropriate practice or did she ask Ms. Smith what help and support she needed to teach the group of kindergarten students or should she not say anything to Ms. Smith? Emily only had two more practicum days with Ms. Smith, then she would be back on-campus at Midwest University to wrap up her semester of classes with Dr. Brown.

While Dr. Brown gathered her jacket from the classroom closet she noticed Ms. Smith standing over Isaiah. Isaiah was sitting in his chair while he worked on his writing. Dr. Brown hears Ms. Smith say, “Isaiah. You’re not following the directions given by Miss Emily. Why are you not listening? You never listen. Why is that?” The classroom had become silent with all the students’ eyes on Isaiah and Ms. Smith. Emily had been kneeling beside another kindergarten student at their table spot when Ms. Smith began to speak to Isaiah.

Ms. Smith told Isaiah to get up and move while pointing to a desk that was situated in a corner away from the classroom tables. Isaiah got up and walked with his worksheet to the desk while his classmates looked on at him. Emily saw Dr. Brown with her jacket over her arm, so she walked over to her. Dr. Brown stated, “Let’s go find a quiet spot to debrief your lesson.” Dr. Brown and Emily begin to leave the classroom. Before leaving the classroom completely, Dr.

Brown turns back towards Ms. Smith, makes eye contact with her, and says, “Thank you Ms. Smith. Enjoy your Thanksgiving holiday.”

Debriefing the Kindergarten Lesson Observation

Dr. Brown and Emily walked to a bench in the hallway near the front office. Dr. Brown began the debrief conversation with Emily like she begins every debrief conversation, “What went well with your lesson? What would you change about your lesson?” Emily began to share with Dr. Brown that Ms. Smith did not like the ideas she had suggested for the phonics lesson when they planned for the observation lesson together the previous week. Emily stated, “I didn’t feel like I could go against her ideas for the lesson. It’s her classroom, but I also knew you would be disappointed in most of the parts of the lesson. I didn’t know what to do.” Tears began to form in Emily’s eyes.

Next, Dr. Brown prompts Emily to think about students’ schooling experience in the classroom, specifically Isaiah’s experiences. She asks Emily, “What are some things we know about developmentally appropriate practices for kindergarten students?” Emily speaks about the NAEYC position statement (NAEYC, 2020) that has been used in multiple EC program courses and the importance of making intentional decisions for young children. Emily asks Dr. Brown how she is supposed to use what she knows is best when the classroom is not hers, the classroom is her mentor teacher’s. Dr. Brown emphasizes with the tensions Emily is experiencing during her practicum experience. Emily continues to share her observations of her mentor teacher, Ms. Smith, including her belief that Ms. Smith never gives Isaiah the same amount of patience or understanding the other kindergarten students receive in the classroom.

Next Steps

Dr. Brown drove home from the observation pondering her next steps. She wondered what ethical leadership would be in this situation. She believed she had a responsibility to Emily, but she wondered about her responsibility to Isaiah, as well. She asked herself if she also had an obligation to make sure Isaiah was receiving a quality schooling experience. While walking to her office on-campus at Midwest University, Dr. Brown remembered MPS had board policy that outlined how students were to be disciplined in classrooms. She looked up the MPS board policy on the MPS website.

POLICY MPST (Local). Through the adoption of this policy, the Board of Education expects to:

1. Promote safety and prevent harm to students, school personnel and visitors in the school district.
2. Approach the use of discipline and behavior-management techniques with dignity and respect.
3. Provide school personnel with clear guidelines about the use of seclusion, isolation and restraint on district property or at any district function or event.
4. Provide parents/guardians information about state guidelines and district policies related to the use of discipline, behavior management, behavior interventions and responses to emergency situations.

5. Promote the use of positive behavioral interventions, including positive behavioral support techniques.

Dr. Brown kept rereading the second statement in the board policy- *Approach the use of discipline and behavior-management techniques with dignity and respect*. She reread and reread the phrase, *dignity and respect*. She opened up her inbox and drafted an email to the school principal, Dr. Miller (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Email to Principal

Hello, Dr. Miller,

Today I completed an observation visit with an EC teacher candidate in Ms. Smith's kindergarten classroom. I was quite concerned by some of Ms. Smith's interaction with the kindergarten students, but I was particularly concerned about her interactions with Isaiah. During the observation visit she removed Isaiah from his table spot during work time to sit at a desk in a corner- away from the classroom tables. I bring these concerns to you as the principal, because I want to make sure every student is treated with dignity and respect during their school day. If you have any questions or would like to discuss the concerns in more detail, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Dr. Brown
Midwest University
EC Faculty

Dr. Brown hovered the cursor over the send button. Maybe sending this email was not a good idea. She did not know this principal, and the principal did not know her. Her thoughts of doubt continued, but as she came back to the words in the policy- *dignity and respect*, she became convicted in sending the email to the principal. She hit send.

Concluding Thoughts

Numerous outcomes are possible after the faculty member sends the email to the principal. While the faculty member may desire collaboration and a community of practice (Jacobs & Burns, 2021) between Midwest University and MPS, this may not be the expectation held by the principal. Additionally, the principal may not be concerned with Ms. Smith's actions in the classroom towards Isaiah, or the principal may be very concerned. Perhaps the principal has harbored ongoing concerns with Ms. Smith's interactions with Isaiah and other kindergarten students, but the principal does not want Midwest University faculty to be involved. The principal may desire the relationship between Midwest University and MPS to be collaborative and mutually beneficial; however, the principal may be wary of involving Midwest University faculty in personnel situations. Ultimately EC faculty supervising EC teacher candidates in local schools must be prepared to navigate any of the possibilities. This case study highlights several

themes EC faculty supervising EC teacher candidates in the context of local public school experience.

Discussion Questions and Class Activities

Discussion Questions

1. What is the role of EC faculty when supervising EC teacher candidates in school practicum placements?
2. Should EC faculty intervene during observation visits? Why or Why not? When should EC faculty intervene during observation visits?
3. What are possible explanations for Ms. Smith's behavior towards the kindergarten students? Isaiah?
4. How should the EC faculty member support EC teacher candidates before, during, and after observation visits?
5. How might the principal respond to Dr. Brown's email? What are the next steps for Dr. Brown?
6. How might universities and public schools create partnerships to serve the needs of EC teacher candidates and students in the public schools?
7. In what ways should practicum experiences support EC teacher candidates in anti-bias, anti-racist, and culturally sustaining pedagogy development?

Class Activities

1. In groups of three or four, review the board policy from the case- Policy MPST. What is noteworthy in the policy? Did Dr. Brown's interpretation of the policy connect with her observations in Ms. Smith's classroom? Why or Why not?
2. In groups of three or four, create an action plan for creating a partnership or a "community of practice" for EC faculty, EC teacher candidates, and mentor teachers.

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Author Biographies

Sarah Jean Baker is an Assistant Professor in the department of Childhood Education and Family Studies of the College of Education at Missouri State University. She earned her Ph. D. in School Improvement from Texas State University. She has experience working in public schools as an early childhood teacher- teaching kindergarten and first grade, as well as leading schools as a school leader. Her research interests include teacher preparation and teacher development for social justice and culturally sustaining pedagogy, early childhood education,

and women's issues in schools. She is a proud mama to four children and often finds her greatest joys and struggles in her mama identity.

Sascha Mowrey studies early childhood education, early childhood teacher education, and the development of social networks and professional roles among early childhood educators. She currently works at the California Department of Education.

Denise Cunningham is a Professor of Early Childhood Education, Department Head of Childhood Education & Family Studies, and Interim Associate Dean for the College of Education at Missouri State University. Dr. Cunningham earned her Ph. D. in Teaching and Learning with specialization in literacy and early childhood education, from the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She has over twenty years of experience as an administrator of both for-profit and not-for-profit child care facilities, and is a former primary teacher and literacy coach for St. Louis Public Schools. Dr. Cunningham teaches literacy and play coursework and serves as research advisor for graduate students in the MS. Early Childhood & Family Development and MS. Ed. Early Childhood Special Education programs. Dr. Cunningham's research interests include early literacy development, early childhood curriculum, and pre-service teacher education. Among Dr. Cunningham's latest work is an edited book entitled, *Professional and Ethical Considerations for Early Childhood Leaders*, IGI Global.

Appendix A

Recommended Readings

Preparing EC teacher candidates is complex work. The following texts are recommended readings for EC faculty. The texts provide additional support, guidance, and relevant research to improve teacher education programs.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Oakes, J. (2019). *Preparing teachers for deeper learning*. Harvard Education Pr.

Jacobs, J., & Burns, R. W. (2021). *(Re)designing programs: A Vision for equity-centered, clinically based teacher preparation*. Information Age Publishing, Inc.