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Early Childhood Field Experience Supervision: Negotiating Praxis

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Early Childhood Field Experience Supervision: Negotiating Praxis

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Abstract

This case examines the complex partnership between the university teacher education program and the host school district. Many factors contribute to the expectations and requirements of both institutions, which can at times, conflict in fundamental ways. The theoretical and research-based methods of early childhood coursework are often different than the reality of those classrooms. Furthermore, the adoption of initiatives like, Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading standards by university teacher education programs must translate to the fieldwork. School and district-wide mandates often overrule best pedagogical and developmentally appropriate practices. With these opposing perspectives how can supervisors bridge the gap between the university classroom and the primary classroom? How can supervisors support teacher candidates and mentor teachers in negotiating rigid curricular programming, and maintain professional partnerships?

Keywords

university-school partnerships; teacher education programs; early childhood education; Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading (CRTL) standards; fieldwork supervision; pedagogical practices; curriculum mandates

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Introduction

Field Experiences are a vital part of teacher education. Nagro and deBettencourt (2017) contend, “field experiences are the best vehicles to prepare future teachers for the complexity and diversity of the classroom” (p.8). Teacher candidates spend valuable time in various classrooms to observe, interact, and teach. Field experiences are often defined as formal, required school and community activities within a teacher preparation program that teacher candidates complete for learning and professional development. Research has shown that field experiences broaden teacher candidates’ understanding of effective classroom instruction and establish a foundation for application of theoretical ideas and translation of research into practice (Vu & Fischer, 2021).

The supervisor of teaching field experiences plays a critical role in the success of teacher candidates. LaBoskey (2005) explains that the role of supervisors is to help teacher candidates connect theory to practice and to purposefully learn from their experiences in the field. “Supervisors adopt the roles of mentor, coach, listener, and advocate” (Diacopoulos & Butler, 2020). The roles and expectations of the teacher candidate, mentor teacher, and university supervisor are often complicated. Negotiating this triadic relationship can be fraught with tensions including power and position. Lack of effective communication is a well-documented problem between mentor teachers and university supervisors (Beck & Kosnik, 2002). Giebelhaus (1995) believes that in order for the student teaching triad to work effectively, each member is critical in the professional development of pre-service teachers and should not only know about the various processes used in supervision, but they should also have a voice in the process.

Partner schools and mentor teachers can vary in many ways such as teachers’ philosophy and pedagogy, school and district mandates, as well as student populations. The extent to which schools subscribe to curriculum can vary from strict adherence to flexible interpretation. With the rigor of scripted, narrow programs and teaching tools increasing in prevalence, it is important to briefly consider how we got here.

The continued integration and insistence upon guided and scripted publisher curricula can be attributed to federal and local educative initiatives and legislation. In 1997, the Congress asked National Institute for Child Health and Human Development to work with the US Department of Education to establish a National Reading Panel (NRP) that would evaluate existing research and evidence to find the best ways of teaching children to read. This 14-member panel reviewed more than 100,000 studies and on April 13, 2000, the NRP concluded its work and submitted its final reports—this is where the Big 5 (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) originated.

One of the influential findings was that the panel supported systematic phonics and phonemic awareness instruction in early grades. Even though they were unable to name specific strategies and activities that work best, never endorsed a particular program, and even went so far as to caution that more research needed to be done in this area, their findings were used as a fundamental aspect to endorse and promote Reading First under Title 1 of No Child Left Behind (Dresser, 2012). The legislation explains that the first purpose of this program is:

To provide assistance to State educational agencies and local educational agencies in establishing reading programs for students in kindergarten through grade 3 that are based on scientifically based reading research, to ensure that every student can read at grade level or above not later than the end of grade 3 (NCLB, 2001).

In order to receive federal funding, districts needed to adopt research-based programs, which limited them to commercially designed curriculum, which narrows the methods that can be used. In the years that followed, things got worse. Schools across the nation implemented these programs with varying degrees of fidelity but overall NCLB did not work, all children were not proficient in reading and math by 2014 and schools were not making Adequate Yearly Progress.

In an effort to mitigate these problems, more money was doled out through Race to the Top funds, which required the state-wide adoption of Common Core State Standards. New standards meant new programs to align with those standards and even more stringent accountability and testing measures.

Testing and accountability provisions remain in place from the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the Every Student Succeeds Act, which was reauthorized by President Obama in 2015. Since 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic, waivers in the areas of testing were granted, but high-stakes examinations have returned in most states and, anecdotally, more and more stringent programs in reading and math are being adopted for use in primary classrooms in an effort to mitigate the learning loss of the pandemic.

While accountability measures across the nation tightened and streamlined curricular programming, research on the science of reading grew and continues to evolve. Beyond the NRP identified essential elements of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, effective literacy instruction should include writing and oracy. Evidence-based instruction in reading must be both explicit and systematic ensuring that foundational skills are introduced, and complex skills are built upon that solid foundation, which fosters deep understanding and proficiency. Explicit reading instruction prioritizes communication, reduces mental overload, promotes active involvement from students, and provides prompt feedback.

Evidence-based reading instruction refers to proven methods and practices to enhance reading performance. According to Bell and Dolainski (2012), “the success of these practices is demonstrated in two ways: by research-study data collected according to rigorous design, and by consensus among expert practitioners who monitor outcomes as part of their practice.” Regardless of how success is measured, results must come from a variety of reliable and valid sources. Many factors influence reading development including motivation, self-efficacy, metacognition, and social-emotional learning. As Afflerbach (2022) contends, evidence-based reading instruction moves beyond skills and strategies to reader-focused instruction to “teach the reader, not the reading.”

Effective reading instruction must be flexible and based on each school districts’ particular demographics and circumstances. School leaders and teachers should have autonomy in their literacy instructional programming to promote equity and achievement for the unique populations of students they are serving. Specific programs, interventions, and products cannot

fulfill an evidence-based approach to teaching reading. Despite decades of educational research confirming and informing best practices in literacy development and instruction, schools continue to strictly adhere to, defend, and identify with commercially published products and programs.

Field supervisors play an integral role in the success of teacher candidates. Often, these supervisors hold the responsibility of forming professional partnerships with schools and districts to facilitate the placement of candidates in field experience courses. When schools or districts deviate from university expectations in their operations or practices, it becomes the duty of the supervisor to address these discrepancies. The following case study explores different themes and implications related to supervision in early childhood fieldwork when such incongruities exist.

Background

Long State University (LSU) and serves a large Midwest metropolis area, serving students in a wide variety of different bachelor's, master's, doctoral, and certificate programs. LSU has a highly diverse faculty and staff that reflect the students and community they serve. As a predominantly black institution (PBI), Long State University students identify as 35% black or African American, 29% white, 15% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 3% two or more races, 12% nonresident alien, and 3% race/ethnicity unknown.

The Early Childhood Program at LSU

The Early Childhood (EC) Program at Long State University offers two bachelor's degree tracks for undergraduates both for traditional students and those already in the early childhood workforce along with a master's degree initial licensure track. Early childhood faculty teach methods courses and supervise co-requisite field experiences. Student enrollment continues to grow, with the recent semester graduating and licensing 46 students from all three tracks of programming.

Students graduating from one of the EC tracks earn their degree and teaching license for birth through second grade in the state. Additionally, the coursework prepares teacher candidates for a preschool special education approval and a license endorsement in English as a Second Language (ESL).

This academic year, the program faculty have redesigned all EC courses to reflect the new Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading standards (CRTL). Given the diversity of students served in the surrounding communities through field experiences, the CRTL standards ensure that teacher candidates are equipped with the training and tools necessary to provide a welcoming, supportive, and inclusive learning environment for all students. A sample of the standards include the following:

Systems of Oppression – Culturally responsive teachers and leaders understand that there are systems in our society, especially, but not limited to, our school system that create

and reinforce inequities, thereby creating oppressive conditions. Educators work actively against these systems in their everyday roles in educational institutions.

Leveraging Student Advocacy – Culturally responsive teachers and leaders will support and create opportunities for student advocacy and representation in the content and classroom.

Content Selections in All Curricula – Culturally responsive teachers and leaders intentionally embrace student identities and prioritize representation in the curriculum. In turn, students are not only given a chance to identify with the curriculum, they become exposed to other cultures within their schools and both their local and global communities.

Student Representation in the Learning Environment – Culturally responsive teachers and leaders ensure the diversity of their student population is equally represented within the learning environment (ISBEa, 2022).

Teacher candidates in the LSU EC program meet these objectives through a variety of course and field work assignments. Arguably, the most valuable application of these standards is through lesson planning and teaching in early childhood classrooms across the region.

Early childhood program faculty model, encourage, and require teacher candidates to develop appropriate learning experiences for the specific populations of children they are working with. This means, lessons plans are differentiated, culturally relevant, and assessments draw on learners' funds of knowledge. An assortment of research-based methods and strategies are integrated along with a variety of materials and resources. Additionally, student interests and learning preferences are considered in planning. In the field experience classrooms, mentor teachers provide LSU teacher candidates with lesson topics that support their units of study. The teacher candidates can and should use district provided resources and curriculum. While simultaneously fostering creativity, integrating multi-modal methods of instruction, and considering the individual needs of their students within their planning and instruction.

Field Experiences at LSU

Field experiences take place in several centers and school districts near the university. As EC candidates earn licensure from birth through grade 2, their field experiences reflect this range. Field Experience A: Infants & Toddlers, Field Experience B: Preschool & Kindergarten, Field Experience C: Grade 1 or 2, with a capstone Student Teaching experience in a preschool-grade 2 classroom. Field experience C has a heavier credit load to allow the teacher candidates an entire school day each week in their primary classroom placement. They are required to teach four different observed/evaluated lessons throughout the semester as follows: one math lesson, one social studies lesson, one science lesson, and one literacy lesson.

Over the past year, teacher candidates in Field C have reported a lack of cooperation in planning and teaching from mentor teachers. Increasingly, LSU teacher candidates are required to teach rigid and often scripted lessons in literacy (especially phonics) and mathematics. Furthermore,

teacher candidates are having a particularly difficult time planning and teaching science and social studies lessons as the mentors explain, “there is just not enough time to get to those subjects on a regular basis.” Program faculty are becoming extremely concerned as lesson planning, teaching, and reflecting are integral to these field courses and teacher candidates are unable to demonstrate the principles of educational theory and philosophy through practical application. This praxis is a critical component of teacher preparation programming, and one that the EC faculty at LSU believe in firmly.

The current primary school placement for Field Experience C is within River Grove Unit School District, which includes one early learning center, five elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school serving 4,290 students. 99.6% are low-income students and 4% English Learners. The 15 traditional undergraduate EC Field Experience C teacher candidates are placed at Columbia Elementary in first and second grade classrooms. Columbia serves students Kindergarten through third grade who identify as 81.2% Black, 10.3% Hispanic, 5% two or more races, and 3.5% White. 56.8% of teachers hold master’s degrees or higher and there is a 74% teacher retention rate. There are four summative designations within the statewide school accountability system: Exemplary, Commendable, Targeted, Comprehensive & Intensive. Last academic school year, Columbia earned Targeted designation, which means they receive additional funding and supports to build local capacity and improve student outcomes (ISBEb, 2022).

The River Grove Mission Statement (which is painted on the wall at the entrance of Columbia Elementary School) states:

River Grove Unit School District’s staff, parents, and community are dedicated to the intellectual, personal, social, and physical growth of students. Our highly qualified staff recognizes the value of professional development in order to rigorously challenge students. Our teaching practices are both reflective and responsive to the needs of our students. Through diversified experiences, our students discover their potential, achieve readiness for college and careers, and succeed in a safe and caring environment (Allegany County Public Schools, n.d.).

Last academic year, the River Grove school board approved the adoption of a new reading curriculum for Columbia Elementary school. According to the publisher, highlights of the new reading program include:

- Teacher’s Editions with tips and scripts embedded throughout the lessons to support educator pedagogy
- Easy-to-follow instructional dialogue for teacher-directed instruction based on a structured literacy approach
- Student workbooks and manipulatives provide built-in practice opportunities to reinforce skills
- Ready-made digital presentation files, summative assessments, implementation resources, and more bring lessons to life and require zero teacher prep (95 Percent Group, n.d.).

Furthermore, River Grove School District leaders require classroom teachers to follow day-to-day plans, teach from provided lesson scripts, assign nightly homework, and implement all assessments as prepared by the publisher.

Case Narrative

Seven teacher candidates were placed in first grade classrooms at Columbia Elementary School. Mentor teachers typically provide LSU students with topics, skills, and sometimes resources to teach lessons for their formal evaluations. As this group of teacher candidates prepared for their first literacy teaching observations, they requested a meeting with their literacy methods professor and field supervisor, Dr. Stone. During this meeting the candidates expressed their frustration with their mentor teachers' insistence on teaching directly from the teacher's manual of their new reading series. Some of the students' complaints included:

- How can I get good grades on my lesson planning or teaching if I must do what the manual says?
- The stories and reading passages are boring!
- Why do some schools let teachers teach how they want and this one is so controlling?
- I want to try out some of the methods we learned about in class.
- The students always exhibit behavior issues during the reading block
- I want to be creative and use interesting materials.
- Grouping the kids would make a big difference.
- There are so many more engaging response methods I'd like to try rather than workbook pages.
- My mentor says all the first-grade classes have to be doing the same lessons on the same day.
- Is it really teaching if I'm just reading from a manual?

Dr. Stone listened intently and took notes while the teacher candidates voiced their concerns. She explained that as guests in the school, they would have to (for now) comply with the mentors' requests in teaching and planning.

Following this meeting, Dr. Stone reviewed the lesson planning and teaching rubrics used to evaluate the teacher candidates. Several domains were likely to prove challenging in light of the stringent circumstances. She wondered how students could be evaluated in areas like critical thinking, variety of materials, accommodations, differentiation, multiple strategies, adapting/adjusting instruction, and research-based planning. Dr. Stone also considered the new CRTL standards integration and how they could possibly be reflected in curricular programming relying so heavily upon publisher materials.

With the first round of literacy teaching observations set for later in the week, Dr. Stone decided to wait and see how they went, then figure out what to do next.

Literacy Field Observations

Dr. Stone headed down to the first-grade wing at Columbia Elementary School observing the perfectly displayed, identical reading response worksheets.

Focus: Author's Purpose
Why do you think the author wrote this story?
<i>The author wrote this story to teach the reader about firefighters and police officers' jobs.</i>

As she entered Mrs. Kind's room, she noticed that the children were all seated at their desks quietly solving the addition problems on their math exit tickets. Dr. Stone smiled and waved to Mrs. Kind and her LSU teacher candidate, Deja as she made her way to an open table at the back of the classroom. Deja came over to explain that the timer on the board was counting down to the literacy block and she would begin her lesson soon. Dr. Stone asked if she was ready and offered some words of encouragement before Deja began her lesson.

Deja calls the first graders to the carpet at the front of the classroom and projects a premade slideshow to guide her lesson, *Mister Bones, Day 3*. "Alright scholars let's begin with our Daily *Fix-it*. Read the sentences to yourself and raise your hand when you know something that needs to be done to fix our sentences." Deja and the first graders determine and correct errors like capitalization, spelling, and punctuation within the two sentences (the "fixed" sentences are then projected). They move onto the *Morning Warm-up* slide, which displays the following prompt: "Today we will read about Barnum Brown, He likes to dig for big bones. What kind of big bones might Barnum Brown find when he digs?" Deja asks the students to take out their reading journals and write a response to the warm-up prompt. "Why would he like to dig for bones, that's weird!" shouts Tatum. Many other students echo his sentiment with things like, "yeah, who wants to dig for bones, gross!" Deja tells the class that they will find out more about Barnum Brown when they read the story soon. For now, the students should try their best to write a response to the warm-up and she gives them five minutes to work. Deja circulates the room providing prompts and clarification as needed. Many of the students chat with their neighbors about seemingly unrelated topics. Despite her efforts, several students have nothing written at the end of the brief work time.

Deja continues her lesson slideshow by displaying and explaining *Amazing Words*, which are two vocabulary terms and definitions, followed by a phonics review of long o digraphs: *oa* and *ow*. Finally, it's time to read the story. Deja asks the students go back to their seats, open their books to page 108, and follow along as they read the story together. To Dr. Stone's surprise, Deja pulls up the publisher's website (with help from the mentor teacher) and plays a recording of the story being read aloud as the pages are flipped. Many students have difficulty following along and throughout the read aloud Deja was turning textbook pages to keep kids on track and reminding them to stay quiet.

“That was a great story, wasn’t it?” Deja asks and receives some nodding heads in response. “Now we’re going to think about the discoveries that Barnum made at what they mean.” She displays the following t-chart slide:

Dug-Up Discoveries	
Discoveries	What it tells us
bones	
teeth	
fossils	

Deja reviews the discoveries made in the story and asks the students to explain what they tell us. Predictably, the students struggle to provide explanations and Deja is compelled to “give” the students the answers she is looking for from the story.

“Well done, first graders, please take out your yellow workbooks and tear out page 85.” The grumbling students slowly take out their workbooks and conversations about lunch ensue. Once Deja regains control and checks (and helps rip out) workbook pages, she explains the directions, “Write the correct word to complete each sentence. Use the word bank to help you.” Deja quickly reads through the terms (bones, Montana, dinosaur, charming, bandanna, museum) and asks the students to complete the workbook page independently. When they are done, students should turn their workbook pages into the bin and read a book quietly while they wait.

Most of the students begin writing on their workbook pages, whispers and wandering eyes were observed by Dr. Stone. Deja monitors the students, reads portions of the workbook page, and reviews directions as needed. Tatum has a difficult time getting started and Dr. Stone noticed that he seemed to be avoiding the work by distracting his neighbors and digging in his desk.

Deja closes her lesson, “You did a wonderful job today, class! We learned so much about Barnum Brown and the dinosaur bones. Tomorrow you’re going to read the story again with Mrs. Kind and do different activities. Thank you for being such hard workers. Mrs. Kind will tell us what we need to do for math.”

Dr. Stone slips out of the room and heads next door to Heather’s classroom for her literacy observation. To her disappointment, Heather executes the exact same lesson as Deja with very little deviation save for wording of directions and classroom management.

As Dr. Stone leaves for the day, she runs into the principal who asks how the observations went. Dr. Stone carefully explains, “The teacher candidates are learning a lot and did a nice job delivering their lessons today. I was somewhat surprised to learn that all the first-grade teachers implement the exact same plans and materials. We’re focusing a great deal on the value of differentiation and integration of research-based strategies along with culturally relevant teaching in our methods courses at the university. Our LSU teacher candidates are having some difficulty

applying the course content to their teaching because their mentors require them to use the teaching materials “as is.” I would love to meet with you to discuss this further when you have the time.”

The principal’s reply indicated that the superintendent, at the direction of the school board, expects all grade levels to be on the same pace with reading and math lessons. Consequently, all teachers have to team plan, teach the same lessons daily, and assign the same homework across the grade level nightly (workbook pages and worksheets). She obliges Dr. Stone with the promise of a future meeting and leaves the office.

Dr. Stone is acutely aware of the fact that building effective partnerships between university teacher preparation programs and P-12 school districts is crucial for fostering a supportive and enriching environment for future educators. On her drive back to campus, Dr. Stone reflects upon the lessons she observed today, the classroom and school climate, and her brief interaction with the Columbia principal. She felt obligated to further address the informal policy that this school had enforced: requiring all teachers and students to be working at the same pace on the same concepts and skills is surely not reflective of the River Grove Mission Statement and blatantly contradicts developmentally appropriate best practices, theory, and research. Dr. Stone contemplated the professional partnership between Long State University and River Grove School District. Because mechanisms for ongoing feedback between the school and university had not been established, she speculated how voicing her concerns might affect her current and future students’ field placements in the schools. Constructive university-school relationships must consider periodic assessment to modify and refine the partnership. This type of feedback loop promotes continuous improvement and ongoing support (Worrell et al., 2014).

Moreover, Dr. Stone considered her role as the university field supervisor and wondered how she could help her teacher candidates bridge the gap between required curricular programming and best practices. She resolved to dedicate the next methods course with her candidates to teaching and practicing integration of best practices and creativity into fixed curricular programs with the hope that her students could bring some of these ideas to their mentors for integration in future lessons. Dr. Stone knew her plan would introduce some practical engagement opportunities like movement, music, groupings, personalization, materials, along with alternatives to worksheets that would be beneficial for her teacher candidates to consider. However, she faced the reality that this was likely to be insufficient, as the position of mentors and the principal seemed uncompromising.

Research suggests that successful university-school partnerships determine a shared vision and desired outcomes or benefits for each institution (Northeast Regional Resource Center, 2004). As such, Dr. Stone would follow-up with the principal to set up a meeting to discuss how they might partner to meet the requirements of both the early childhood program at Long State and the River Grove School District. She hoped that they would be able to clarify roles, responsibilities, and expectations to maximize mutual benefits for the school and university. Finally, Dr. Stone would try to find alternative school partners in the area that would be better aligned with the expectations of the university for Field Experience C.

Concluding Thoughts

Field supervisors, like Dr. Stone, play a critical role in the success of teacher candidates. At universities like Long State, supervisors are responsible for establishing professional partnerships with schools and districts to place students for field experience courses. There are many factors that contribute to these types of placements, with proximity to the university being a primary consideration. When schools or districts operate in ways or adhere to practices that contradict university expectations, it is often the duty of the supervisor to address these issues. This case study describes various themes and implications of supervision in early childhood fieldwork.

Classroom Application Activities

1. In small groups, review the River Grove Mission statement. First, discuss how the school's current practices challenge the tenants of this statement. Then, conceptualize alternative methods that would better align to the mission.
2. Role-play the meeting between Dr. Stone and the Columbia Elementary School principal. In teams, develop arguments for each position. Then, two volunteer representatives act out the meeting while the rest of the class "fishbowl" observes, listens to the discussion, and takes notes. Participants can take turns playing each role. Follow-up with a whole class discussion on the ways this conversation could play out; could the principal and Dr. Stone find a viable compromise?
3. Compare Deja's lesson to the sample of Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading standards listed at the beginning of this lesson. Generate a list of ways that Deja could modify her lesson to better align with these standards.
4. As Dr. Brown contemplates an alternative field site for her teacher candidates, what are some questions she needs to ask or ideas she should consider in a new placement. Draft an introductory email she could send to potential partner school principals. Make sure you review the needs of the university and current concerns.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the role of early childhood faculty when supervising teacher candidates in the field?
2. What could Dr. Stone have done prior to Deja's (and Heather's) first teaching observations to better understand their situations?
3. Do you think Dr. Stone's plan to teach her students about integration practices would be beneficial in this situation? To what capacity? Why or why not?
4. How might Dr. Stone and the LSU faculty need to adjust their field expectations and requirements to accommodate those of Columbia Elementary?
5. What role do supervisors play in preparing mentor teachers for hosting field students? Should mentors undergo professional development or trainings hosted by university supervisors? What types of information should be included? How could this benefit all stakeholders (university students, ec/elementary students, mentor teachers, administrators, university faculty/supervisors, etc.)?

6. How can universities and schools develop partnerships that best meet the needs of all students?
7. Giebelhaus (1995) posits, “we should use supervision as an entry key for establishing better communication and true partnerships with the schools in which our students will someday teach.” To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? In what ways could supervision be the “key” to which Giebelhaus refers?

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