

Preservice Teacher Field Experiences in Reading: A Collaborative Model

By

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Abstract

Research suggests that experiences teaching in field placements are some of the most powerful influences on preservice reading teacher's knowledge, perceptions, and practices. Unfortunately, these kinds of placements do not always expose teacher candidates to best literacy practices. To mitigate concerns about the role of negative field experiences teacher educators must examine how they use field experiences to prepare preservice teachers to meet the challenges associated with the realities of classrooms that feature learners with widely varying reading abilities. This article describes how a university professor and elementary teacher collaborated to develop a field experience model that was reciprocal in nature. The model, called the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading, was designed to be flexible and mutually beneficial for participating children, preservice teachers, classroom teachers, and university faculty. The three principles grounding the model are the need for a student-centered, critical foundation; a focus on motivation and assessment; and the role of planning, innovation, and reflection. In this article the author presents the model and discusses possible affordances and constraints associated with its use.

Background and Purpose

Like many teacher educators, I have faced challenges while trying to provide preservice teachers with experiences that will “promote effective teaching and that will maximize student learning” (Ostorga & Lopez-Estrada, 2009, p. 18). When I first became a faculty member and was assigned responsibility for the only reading methods course required in an undergraduate elementary education program, I was startled to find that no field time had previously been built into or assigned to the reading course. During the first semester, however, I followed the format set before my arrival and had students plan for and teach reading lessons to their peers in our campus classroom. While these experiences allowed us to engage in relatively deep discussions about theory, planning, engagement, and assessment, the lesson implementations and debriefing sessions afterward felt artificial because they were divorced from children in elementary classrooms. As one of my students said, “This was great, but will it work with *real* kids?”

During the past two decades many university teacher preparation programs have worked in partnership with local school districts to provide field-based experiences for teacher candidates (Ambrose, Natale, Murphey & Schumacher, 1999; Harper & Sadler, 2003; Johnson, 2010; Johnson & Atland, 2004; Petray & Hill, 2009). Such partnerships are often established because educators believe that integrating field experiences into coursework is a positive way to provide teacher candidates with experiences that promote effective teaching (Chiang, 2008) because “such experiences modify and enrich student teachers’ thinking and conceptual understanding about teaching and learning (Loyens & Gijbels, 2008; Parkison, 2009; Cherubini, 2008; Loyens, Rikers, & Schmidt, 2008)” (Hughes, 2009, p. 252). As a new faculty member I was eager to establish field

experiences in reading for preservice teachers, so I looked for such partnerships at my own university. Unfortunately, I found the partnership that had been in place prior to my arrival was ending. There were no plans for the establishment of a new partnership. I had worked extensively in elementary settings while in graduate school, but those sites were established and maintained by field coordinators. In my new setting I did not yet have ties to the community or to local schools. How could I get my students into classrooms? What kinds of field experiences should they have? Who might be willing to work with us? Could all involved benefit from a field-based collaboration?

As I struggled with these questions, I searched the literature to see what I could find about effective field experiences in preservice teacher education in general, and, more specifically, about effective field experiences in preservice literacy education. At the same time, I reached out to practicing teachers in a graduate-level literacy class I was teaching and asked them for feedback on my questions. What emerged from those initial parallel inquiries was the beginning of a series of collaborations that have resulted in an ever-evolving model for field experiences in undergraduate reading methods courses. In this article I will describe the development of the model, its guiding principles, elements included in both its initial and most recent phases of implementation, and the affordances and constraints associated with its use thus far. In doing so I hope to invite further discussion about the role of field experiences in the preparation of reading teachers, other new models for such field experiences, and the need for research evaluating their efficacy.

The Role of Field Experiences in New Teacher Preparation

Over a decade ago Hoffman and Pearson (2000) reviewed and summarized research done on the preparation of reading teachers and concluded that the preparation necessary for teachers who taught two to three generations ago was quite straightforward. At that time teachers taught in schools very like the ones they had attended. Today's teachers, however, face a very different scenario. They must be prepared to teach in classrooms that will likely be quite different from those they knew as students -- classrooms rich in diversity, electronic texts, and global media.

Teacher educators are well aware of the fluid nature of current classrooms. Many have argued that past teacher training models, which placed emphasis on new educators mastering procedural routines of practice that focused primarily on classroom management (Kagan, 1992), are no longer sufficient to meet current demands for teachers to be knowledgeable, critical, reflective, and flexible in a high tech, global world (Green, 1971; Grossman, 1992; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000). Instead, scholars have posited that reading teacher education models must focus on the development of empowered teachers who are in control of their own thinking and actions (Duffy, 1991).

At the same time that teacher educators are trying to find ways to prepare preservice educators to actively analyze, question, and plan for challenges in their own schools and classrooms, research has found that most new teachers report that influences associated with their teacher education programs are fairly weak. Instead, they feel that their strongest influences often come from the sixteen years they spent as students themselves. This familiarity with classrooms, which Lortie (1975) termed the "Apprenticeship of Observation," has long been thought to makes it difficult for teacher

candidates to contemplate alternative possibilities when it comes to teaching and learning (Dewey, 1904; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985; Grossman, 1991). Ideas about teaching and learning that come from the “Apprenticeship of Observation” have been found to run counter to current conceptions about good practice (Calderhead & Robson, 1991). Conversely, student teaching and field experiences are usually seen as helpful, but often tend to reinforce rather than challenge teacher candidates’ traditional beliefs about teaching and learning (Resnick, 1987; Clark, 1998; Calderhead & Robson, 1991; Kagan, 1992). Novice teachers report learning the most about pedagogy from field experiences (Stone, 1987; Kragler & Nierenberg, 1999), but increased time in the classroom does not necessarily correlate with experience using effective practices (McIntye, Byrd, and Foxx, 1996).

In order to bridge possible disconnects between research-based best practices and instruction found in field settings, teacher education programs have begun to offer courses that are often located in local schools or community settings (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006; Hollins & Guzman, 2005; Leland & Harste, 2005). “Placing students, university faculty, and courses in neighborhood schools helps connect the reality of working in a school with the pedagogy and content covered in university courses” (Catapnao & Huisman, 2010). Such programs allow space and time for field experiences that have the greatest potential for effectiveness – those that provide preservice teachers with opportunities for reflection, innovation, and ownership (Willard-Holt and Bottomley, 2000). However, these same programs sometimes fail to consider teaching and learning goals that go beyond the teacher candidates. Site-based models need to shift their foci to include the needs of teachers, students, schools, and communities (along with the needs

of the preservice teachers and the university faculty). Programs that have made this shift have developed collaborative models that feature reciprocal relationships where the school and university work collaboratively to provide mutually beneficial experiences for all involved (Petray & Hill, 2009). A challenge associated with such collaborative models, however, is that the teaching and learning needs of children and teachers vary from classroom to classroom, even if those classrooms are in the same school building. While there is a dearth of research in this area, some scholars have concerns that novice teachers may be too inexperienced to determine how to best meet the needs in their assigned field settings and will require direction from university faculty (Hoffman & Pearson, 2000). At the same time, it is likely that university faculty will have very limited amounts of time to spend with teacher candidates in individual classrooms, even if they offer classes on site.

The Need for Collaboration

In their work documenting the teaching of teachers, Hoffman and Pearson (2000) note that their preferred focus on inservice settings with small collectives of teachers over preservice settings at universities creates a discontinuity that exists in both their research and practice. Though the authors note that this discontinuity is a cause for concern, they argue that their focus on smaller groups within school settings has value.

It is true that we have privileged, highly situated, decidedly local, and intensely personal models of teacher learning in this section on teaching teachers. It is our position that such models challenge us to think differently than traditional change and staff development models (Hoffman, 1998)...Indeed, many leading scholars (e.g., Fullan, 1993;

Lieberman, 1996; Little, 1992; Nelson & Hammerman, 1996) insist that the school is the appropriate unit of teacher learning, that teacher learning *is* school learning. Even so, we are equally suspicious of the bureaucratization of learning that can occur when individual needs and interests are overlooked in favor of the common good. (Hoffman and Pearson, 2001, p. 39)

When considering what kinds of field experiences would be most effective in preparing preservice reading teachers, I was intrigued by Pearson and Hoffman's (2000) argument that small, personal, and local models might challenge those involved to think differently about teaching and learning. I also thought there was a possibility that if I could find one elementary teacher who was willing to collaborate with me, then we could design a reciprocal model that would allow both of us to be available to our students during most field visits. Instead of sending teacher candidates off to participate in literacy teaching and learning in classrooms throughout a collaborating school, I was interested in seeing if there was a way we could keep things personal and small by working to meet the needs of developing readers and their teacher together in one classroom.

Identifying Teachers as Collaborators and Engaging School Personnel

During the Spring of 2007 I asked graduate students in a literacy course I was teaching what kinds of field experiences they thought would be most valuable to beginning reading teachers and how they thought those kinds of experiences might benefit not only university students, but the elementary teachers and students as well. One of those graduate students was a first grade teacher at a local elementary school who

was very excited about the notion of new teachers having field experiences that emphasized reading. That teacher, whom I will refer to as Elizabeth (a pseudonym), was a graduate of the elementary education program at the university where I was teaching. When we met she was finishing her Masters in Literacy Education.

During several conversations after class I learned that Elizabeth had struggled when she first began to teach young readers. Before she was assigned to a first grade classroom, Elizabeth had previously spent several years teaching children in upper elementary grades. During her initial year in first grade Elizabeth had felt lost and was especially unsure about how to assess beginning readers. Because of these experiences, she felt strongly that preservice teachers should learn a great deal about literacy assessment in their teacher preparation programs and that they should also spend time in classrooms assessing and teaching children as a part of those programs.

After our course together was completed I approached Elizabeth about the possibility of using her classroom as a field site for my reading methods course and she readily agreed. Because I was concerned that our collaboration be reciprocal, I told Elizabeth that I hoped she would help me to develop a field model that would be built around her students and their needs as beginning readers. Over the next academic year (2007-2008) Elizabeth and I met two to three times a semester and talked about how such a model for reading field experiences might work. It was during that time that we established the grounding principles for our model, which we called the “Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading.”

Guiding Principles

Principle One: A Student-Centered, Critical Foundation

While Elizabeth and I co-constructed the second and third guiding principles associated with the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading, I authored and established the first principle before I began to consider possible field sites. This principle, which states that the field visits must have a student-centered, critically grounded foundation is closely aligned with a theoretical frame that is central to my own teaching philosophy.

Critical theories of literacy are derived, in part, from critical social theory, particularly its concern with the alleviation of human suffering and the formation of a more just world through the critique of existing social and political problems and the posing of alternatives. ‘Critique’ from this perspective involves ‘criticism of oppression and exploitation and the struggle for a better society’ (Kellner, 1989, p. 46). (Cervetti, Pardales, & Damico, 2001)

As a former elementary educator, I understood that the time children spent with the developing preservice teachers from my reading methods course would come out of the time they normally had with their experienced, committed classroom teacher. It was true that the teacher candidates needed a chance to develop their knowledge base and practice by engaging with real elementary readers in real elementary classrooms. When considered from a critical perspective, however, it was also true that the children in those classrooms deserved and needed the best reading instruction their teachers could provide. Spending two hours with novice teachers several times during a semester could mean they would spend up to eight hours engaged in reading experiences that might have little

or no value for them. Also, there was the possibility that negative interactions with inexperienced teachers might leave them feeling badly about their reading abilities.

In order to guard against negative impacts and the loss of instructional time, I asked Elizabeth (along with the preservice teachers) to help us make certain the well being and literacy learning of the children in her classroom were our first priorities. In order to maintain this stance throughout our field visits, the preservice teachers and I always begin planning for visits by asking collaborating teachers (and the students themselves) several questions:

1. How can we help?
2. What can we do to support students and teachers as individuals and as readers?
3. How can we be sure we are not overlooking the needs of children and teachers in the service of our own?

Throughout time spent in the field I repeat these questions and ask all others involved to help make certain that we never forget the fact that the children are the center of our work together.

Principle Two: A Focus on Motivation and Assessment

As we began developing the second guiding principle of the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading, Elizabeth and I discussed our own past experiences as new first grade teachers who had no idea how to understand or address the needs of our students and their widely varying reading abilities. Because of those experiences, we believe that all reading teachers (including those new to the profession) need to know how to learn about their individual students: who they are as individuals, as learners, and as readers? What do they value? What kinds of life experiences have they had? What

do they care about? What do they already know about reading? What do they want to learn? These are just a few of the questions that led us to establish the second guiding principle: that teacher candidates would be better prepared to teach reading to all children if they had field experiences that required them to motivate and assess individual readers.

In his discussion of the contexts for engagement and motivation in reading Guthrie (2001) noted that studies have confirmed the conventional wisdom that choice is motivating for readers and that providing choices is a prominent practice among reading teachers (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hexter, 1998). According to Guthrie, researchers have found teachers believe children need choice to establish reading independence and that “Turner (1995) found that teachers who are successful at motivating students often provide myriad choices during a lesson” (Autonomy Support section, para. 1).

After considering Guthrie’s (2001) findings, Elizabeth and I decided that the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading model should emphasize the importance of choice in reader motivation. We incorporated that element into the model by requiring that preservice teachers provide children with opportunities to choose from large varieties of books tied to their individual interests during each field visit. Before the teacher candidates could accomplish this goal, however, they needed to learn about children as individuals and as readers. To that end we designed assessment, planning, and instructional interactions that they focused on pairs: preservice teachers candidates randomly matched with elementary students. Once established these “buddy” pairs remained intact throughout the time spent in the field, allowing children and teacher candidates to develop ongoing relationships. “The involved teacher knows about the

students' personal knowledge and interests, cares about each student's learning, and holds realistic, positive goals for students' effort and learning" (Guthrie, 2001, Teacher Involvement section, para. 1).

The paired "buddy" relationships also provided beginning reading educators with opportunities to learn about, administer, and analyze common forms of reading assessment. As stated earlier, both Elizabeth and I had needed learn how to assess what children knew about reading *after* we were already certified teachers with classrooms full of students. We felt strongly that preservice teachers should have experiences with administering and evaluating the results of assessments early in literacy field settings for two main reasons. First, teacher candidates need to be familiar with the wide variety of assessments that are available so that they can make knowledgeable choices when evaluating readers. "Evaluation activities can be placed on a continuum from highly objective and standardized (i.e., standardized tests) to highly student-centered and personalized (i.e., portfolios)" (Guthrie, 2001, Evaluation section, para. 1). Preservice teachers involved in the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading are introduced to the reading assessment continuum and have opportunities to explore the purposes for many of those assessments. Secondly, Elizabeth and I also determined that teacher candidates should learn to use data gathered from assessments administered to make instructional decisions for their reading buddies. While summative assessments, such as standardized tests and district benchmark assessments, are generally easy to administer, score, and report to administrators, they fail to reflect student ownership, motivation, and reading practices (Guthrie, 2001). In short, they are not particularly helpful in guiding student learning on a day-to-day basis. Therefore, preservice teachers

in the collaborative model class focus on analyzing and using data gathered in the administration of formative assessments. These assessments, which might include things like fluency rubrics, Running Records, and reading inventories, are part of the instructional process and provide information needed to plan for and adjust teaching and learning.

The three in-depth field visits I initially designed for the winter of 2009 incorporated the key elements (motivation and engagement) of while also focusing on planning. Preservice teachers who visited Elizabeth's classroom that semester established relationships with their assigned reading buddies and administered several different assessments. The reading assessments and topics implemented during those visits (Table 1) were carefully chosen so they provided both positive reading experiences for the children in Elizabeth's class and also data the teacher candidates could gather and use to plan and implement reading lessons based on their buddies' needs.

Table 1.

The reading assessments and activities associated with initial field visits (Winter, 2009)

Visit	Assessments and Activities
One	Assess using reading interest and attitude surveys; read aloud and interact with children around books; map where reading happens in the classroom.
Two	Assess for word recognition, fluency, and comprehension; write, draw and/or discuss responses to literature.
Three	Implement personalized reading lessons.

Principle Three: The Role of Planning, Innovation, and Reflection

When designing the kinds of field experiences that would be associated with the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading, Elizabeth and I tried to provide

time for preservice teachers to plan, implement, and reflect upon lessons they developed based on data gathered from the assessments of their reading buddies. We wanted teacher candidates and children to have opportunities to be involved in rich, relevant, and meaningful classroom reading activities that both addressed areas of need and motivated everyone involved to want to learn more. New teachers entering classrooms today can expect to find a variety of instructional and curricular possibilities, depending on state, district, and building level policies regarding the teaching of reading. “Although some teachers are required or encouraged to use specific programs, others can choose which curriculum materials to use and how to use them” (Valencia et al., 2006, p. 94). Because of these circumstances, Elizabeth and I established the third guiding principle of the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading: teacher candidates should participate in lesson planning experiences that challenge them to be innovative in meeting the needs of their learners, require them to reflect carefully on the efficacy of their work, and encourage them to take ownership of all aspects of their professional involvement.

As we considered what kinds of lesson planning experiences we wanted preservice teachers to have in their reading field encounters, Elizabeth and I discussed grounding those experiences in a constructivist philosophy of education, a philosophy which espouses that learners construct original concepts as they investigate and compare new and existing knowledge and experiences (Piaget, 1950; Vygotsky, 1978).

Constructivist theory places the teacher in the role of facilitator -- someone who helps learners to organize and manage information, instead of passively absorbing it (Henson, 2001). As preservice teachers learn to plan for and implement instruction it is key that they are encouraged to experiment and think outside the box, rather than relying on

previously witnessed or established managerial routines (Grossman, 1992; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000). However, research indicates that novice teachers tend to follow written plans step-by-step without modifications, even when new situations require an alteration in the plan (Westerman, 1991). Further, reflection is a difficult skill – especially for novice teachers who have had limited (if any) prior experiences planning and implementing lessons in elementary classrooms. Elizabeth and I considered these challenges but concluded that taking a constructivist stance on lesson planning in the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading would mean that we stressed active, innovative, reflective decision-making over reliance on a set of behaviors that could be applied to all situations (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). We built the third guiding principle of the model based on the belief that "Preservice teachers can and should be given the opportunity to learn how to become reflective practitioners, capable and confident of making pedagogical decisions based on what they are learning about themselves and their students" (Moore et al., 1999, p. 273).

Discussion

Since meeting and continuing to work with Elizabeth, I have also collaborated with two other former graduate students to establish field sites in fifth and seventh grade classrooms. Each time the relationships have evolved very organically, with the teachers and I engaging in discussions in and out of Masters classes about what reading teachers need to know and think about. The fifth grade teacher actually taught in Elizabeth's building and knew of our collaboration. At the end of her Master's program she asked if I would consider bringing teacher candidates to work with her students as well. I approached the seventh grade teacher because of her willingness to share questions about

her own teaching and learning and because my undergraduate students were asking for experiences teaching reading in middle school settings. In each of these cases reading assessments and activities associated with recent field visits (Table 2) have varied according to the needs of the collaborating teachers and students, but we have followed the same set of guiding principles.

Table 2.

The reading assessments and activities associated with latest field visits (Winter, 2011)

Visit	Assessments and Activities
Prior to field visits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introducing the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences and its Guiding Principles 2. Participating in a School/Community Overview 3. Investigating Key Elements of Reading Success and Associated Assessments
One	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Getting to Know Each Other 2. Assessing Using Reading Interests/Attitudes Surveys 3. Reading Aloud and Interacting with Children Around Books 4. Mapping Reading Areas in the Classroom
Two	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reading Together 2. Advancing Knowledge about Individual Readers Through Key Assessments
Three	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Implementing the Reading Lesson
Four	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sharing and Celebrating Reading

Affordances

The reciprocal nature of the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading insures affordances for the university Elementary Education program, reading methods professor, preservice teachers, elementary school classroom teachers, and elementary school students. The Collaborative Model provides teacher candidates with an elementary school setting where they are able to apply course content in a real world

setting. This model also allows the university professor direct access to collaborating teachers, children, and elementary school facilities.

Under the guidance of the university professor and the collaborating teacher, preservice teachers are provided with opportunities to develop the following skills:

1. Form relationships with individual readers and gain knowledge about who they are as individuals and as readers by engaging with them around books. Assess them using reading interests and attitude surveys to find out the kinds of books that will appeal to them.
2. Become more deeply aware of what readers know about reading and how to motivate them by providing a wide variety of texts from which they can choose and by assessing them with a variety of reading measures.
3. Use data gathered in the previous two visits to plan for and implement a reading lesson targeting the specific needs of an individual reader. Reflect about what went well during the lesson and what could have gone better. Consider next steps in the planning process.
4. Celebrate the joy of reading with children. Share read alouds and discuss responses to literature with individual readers.

Elementary school students benefit from the collaboration because they receive six to eight hours of one-on-one reading assessment and instruction taught by preservice teachers. They receive instruction tailored to meet their individual needs and also have numerous opportunities to choose from wide varieties of books based on their own interests with the ultimate goal of becoming intrinsically motivated readers. Finally, they

develop positive relationships with their preservice reading buddies and are encouraged to read widely.

Collaborative elementary classroom teachers receive assistance in assessing individual readers in their classrooms. They are also able to observe their students without having to be primarily responsible for instruction at the same time. The teachers can also formulate the focus of the visits by informing the university professor of the reading needs of their students.

The Collaborative Model benefits the university professor in several ways. It allows for direct access to collaborating teachers, children, and elementary school facilities and provides mutually beneficial relationships with teacher partners. It also specifies a flexible framework that can change quickly based on the needs of teachers, children, and/or teacher candidates.

Constraints

In school settings the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading has been found to have several constraints. First and foremost, children lose instructional time in reading with their classroom teacher. This factor is somewhat mitigated by the amount of one-on-one instruction children receive from preservice teachers, but there are some children who are uncomfortable working in one-on-one situations. As a result, the design of these interactions has proven stressful for some of them. Another constraint involves the repetitive nature of the focus on reading assessment that informs most field visits. Children have gotten tired of spending time on the assessments.

School personnel also have problems with certain aspects of the field visits. They often have difficulty finding space to accommodate combined numbers of preservice

teachers and elementary students in a single locale and past classes have had to spread out into two or more classrooms. While this arrangement certainly addresses the need for more space, it interferes with the original goal of providing common field experiences for both the teacher candidates and their professor.

There are also concerns that the model's focus on individual readers does not grant preservice teachers opportunities to manage reading instruction at the whole class level and can seriously limit their exposure to the varied reading abilities that exist within a single elementary classroom. Although the latter situation is somewhat addressed when teacher candidates share their experiences in debriefing sessions after field visits, there remains the awareness that the model does not allow for preservice teachers to interact with diverse populations of readers.

For the university professor and the collaborating teachers a major constraint is the time it takes to implement the Collaborative Model. Because the primary concern is always the needs of the children, the overall instructional focus can change each semester even though the structure remains inherently the same. Also, as previously mentioned, collaborating teachers lose in-class instructional time spent with their students. Likewise, the university professor has to give up on-campus class sessions because there is no field time designated for the course. Though the impact and importance of the field visits seem to justify the loss of direct instructional time, it has proved difficult to manage the redesign and redistribution of course content.

A final constraint is the lack of research done on the Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading's design or efficacy. As with all pedagogical models, research is needed before any claims can be made about impact on teaching and learning.

Concluding Thoughts

The Collaborative Model for Field Experiences in Reading could be a useful tool for teacher education programs beginning or continuing discussions about embedded field experiences in reading methods courses. The model provides guiding theoretical principles, structure for identifying the various elements included for the benefit of all involved, and it serves as a mechanism to enable continuity while also allowing for differences among field experiences. Because the model provides both content and structure for the development, organization, and assessment of field experiences, it could also possibly be used as a template for analyzing, organizing, or improving field experience in other areas, thus increasing its value and utility.

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