DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 376 157 SP 035 579

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TITLE A Pre-Student Teaching Field-Based Semester.
PUB DATE 13 Oct 94
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, October 13, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College School Cooperation; *Demonstration Programs; Education Courses; Elementary Education; Elementary School Teachers; *Field Experience Programs; Higher Education; Laboratory Schools; Learning Experience; Portfolio Assessment; Preservice Teacher Education; *Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; Public Schools; Student Teaching; Teacher Educators; *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Preservice Teachers

ABSTRACT

This project is an exploration of the benefits of a field-based pre-student teaching semester in which elementary education students work with college professors and practicing elementary teachers in a more holistic way than is possible with traditional campus-based courses. A group of twenty-six college students met four days each week, seven hours each day for a combination of lecture, group interaction, and classroom experiences. The classroom site for this project was a room within the university laboratory school converted for this use allowing convenient access to the teachers and students in the laboratory school. The project students also worked in groups of six and seven in four public schools located in areas with a more culturally diverse student population than is typical of the laboratory school. Project evaluation indicated that participants believed they were better prepared for student teaching than within a more traditional program. Practicing teachers in the laboratory school and the public schools expressed the belief that their students also benefitted from this experience. Scheduling, communications, coordination, and curriculum development are areas that need considerable attention for successful implementation of the model. (Author)

A Pre-Student Teaching Field-Based Semester

by

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association. Chicago, Illinois. October 13, 1994.

Abstract

This project is an exploration of the benefits of a field-based pre-student teaching semester in which elementary education students work with college professors and practicing elementary teachers in a more holistic way than is possible with traditional campus-based courses. A group of twenty-six college students met four days each week, seven hours each day for a combination of lecture, group interaction and classroom experiences. The classroom site for this project is a room within the university laboratory school converted for this use allowing convenient access to the teachers and students in the laboratory school. The project students also worked in groups of six and seven in four public schools located in areas with a more culturally diverse student population than is typically of the laboratory school. Project evaluation indicates that participants believe they are better prepared for student teaching than within a more traditional program. Practicing teachers in the laboratory school and public schools expressed the belief that their students are also benefiting from this experience. Scheduling, communications, coordination and curriculum development are areas that need considerable attention for successful implementation of this model.

Introduction

Project FORCE (Finding Opportunities to Restructure College Education) combines theory and practice in a more integrated way than is possible through existing discrete courses. The Department of Education identified several shortcomings of teacher education programs as early as the 1960's. Dewey (1925/1981) argued that experience and knowledge are closely connected. Growth occurs when individuals have the opportunity to be actively engage in creating knowledge and reflecting on their experiences. Students in a teacher education program need to have the opportunity to work with children early in their professional sequence, develop the connection between theory and practice by interacting students in classes and refine newly found teaching skills in contextually meaningful settings (Lanier & Little, 1986). The project is designed to allow students an integrated experience with a wide range of children in meaningful ways.

Current required courses in teaching methods are scheduled at times convenient for room and faculty assignments without regard to the relationship between content areas. Students in a social studies teaching methods course may have completed a course in assessment while others have not had such a course. This makes it difficult for the class to discuss the topic of assessment of social studies skills. Students in the mathematics teaching methods course may not be taking the science teaching methods course in the same semester. The opportunity for planning activities in these closely related fields is lost. Some courses give students a chance to connect theory and practice by working with children in schools and others do not. This random progress through the

professional education course sequence leaves teacher education students with little opportunity to integrate and reflect upon a complex set of experiences.

Background

Other field-based programs have attempted to combine theory with practice in special method courses prior to student teaching. Schivley, et. al., (1991) describe a junior year experience in which students work in public schools two days a week for ten weeks and attend classes the other days of the week. Content areas in this program include science, social studies, communications media and child development. They found that over ninety-five percent of the students participating in the program felt more prepared for student teaching, and believed that they would be successful teachers. Lydecker (1987) found that a Saturday program of elementary school age children proved to be beneficial for pre-student teaching students in social studies and science teaching method classes. Another successful model combines campus classes and student teaching over a two year period of time (Becham, B. G., et. al., 1991). Students spend two days a week in public schools and three days on campus during the Fall semester and then reverse this ratio with student teaching in the Spring. Becham concluded that; elementary education students benefited from this extended experience when compared to a more traditional track; the reflective model used with this program helped improve the mentoring and teaching practices of cooperating teachers; and the staff-development component, in which university professors taught on-site courses for cooperating teachers,

established a closer relationship between university faculty and public school personnel.

Project Description

Project FORCE's central theme is the integration of experiences. Students work in a variety of content areas simultaneously. Method's students benefit from the integrated approach to special teaching methods by exploring the connections between content areas as well as within a particular content area. Expressive arts, physical movement, assessment, and technology are an integral part of instruction. The discussion of theory takes place in the context of real world activities. For example, the connections between mathematics, science, social studies, music and other human endeavors that mathematics supports is made more explicit in interdisciplinary activities. Planning for reading and writing instruction can be done in conjunction with social studies, mathematics, science and the other disciplines. Issues in assessment of student progress are brought to life through practical experiences. Technological support for instruction is infused into the normal flow of instruction. The rich relationship of complex learning tasks are explored experientially by The Project's participants.

A combination of instruction by University professors, classroom teachers, school administrators; discussion between project participants, readings on the theory and practice of instruction, cooperative planning within project groups, observation of instruction, working with children, and reflective insight provides a basis for insight into their own personal attributes as a teacher. This rich environment of action and reflection is the basis for the formation of a

community of learners. This community brings together teacher and student, theorists and practitioners, children and adults in a manner that fosters the construction of a better understanding of roles and responsibilities of all participants in the educational setting.

Curriculum and Instruction faculty supervise the investigation, planning, presentation, and reflection of lessons developed by project participants. Theories of instruction connected to practice and practice shapes theory through work with children and teachers at several the several teaching sites for Project FORCE. Participants engage in a thoughtful review of research and scholarly work in special teaching methods and general theoretical topics. The results of these investigations are reflected in a personal bibliography and citations within lessons and their own scholarly writing.

Although all of these programs show some measure of success, none have tried to combine the qualities of a field-based approach, a holistic curriculum and site-based classes. Students in Project FORCE work more closely with university faculty, practicing teachers, and school children than is possible with a program split between field experience and campus-based classes. The holistic approach to the introduction of teaching methods in the content areas addressed by this project, normally segmented into discrete components in more traditional programs, gives a more connected view of elementary school curriculum. Socialization of pre-student teaching education majors also improves by working out of a room in the laboratory school. A close identification with the physical space gives a sense of community and collegiality not present in other field-based programs that scatter students between a number of cooperating sites.

In summary, the unique features of Project FORCE combine to form an experience for pre-student teaching elementary education majors which is much different from other existing field-based elementary education programs. The rich immersion in the culture of schools eases the transition from campus-based courses to relatively isolated independence during student teaching. Students have the opportunity to test theory against practice working with children in classrooms with the collaborative support of peers, university faculty, and practicing teachers. The overall result is the development of pre-student teachers into professional educators who are willing to explore the theoretical and practical issues of elementary education, and to become more reflective decision makers.

Place of One's Own

The laboratory school on the campus is the home base of operations. A room in the building is available for large and small group instruction, informal discussion, teaching supplies and materials, and a repository for participant's professional portfolios. The close physical proximity, a room within the laboratory school, is instrumental for the enculturation of project participants into the teaching profession and faculty community at the laboratory school. Teacher education students experience the environment of the school for the semester.

Each of the participants in Project FORCE is required to establish a close connection with one of the children at the laboratory school who needs assistance in learning a specific content area. This ongoing tutoring/mentoring experience

builds a bond between the teacher and student that is generally not possible with large group instruction of short duration. Through this more intensive activity, the project participant has a chance to directly experience the joys and frustrations of a learner. Most students have difficulty learning at some point in their education. An empathetic posture gained by Project FORCE participants for students who have learning difficulties will help shape planning for instruction of all students. In other words, prospective teachers should be able to help one child before they can help many children in a classroom setting.

The city public schools have also joined in Project FORCE. Although the children at the laboratory school are representative of different developmental stages, they are a special group who have self-selected participation in a private school. Teachers and principals of four city public elementary schools and an alternative school have enthusiastically agreed to help broaden the experiences available to Project FORCE participants. The faculty at four public elementary schools and the alternative storefront school are providing access to their classes. Students in FORCE have the opportunity to work with children who come from economically disadvantaged families and classes that are ethnically diverse.

Evaluation

The qualitative approach taken by the project for exploring new relationships between university faculty and school personnel is in part pragmatic and at the same time philosophical. The project is guided by the quest for providing experiences that make students feel more confident and well prepared for student teaching, establish collegiality between public school and

university teachers, become effective reflective decision makers in the classroom, and demonstrate the interrelationship of content areas. Over a period of semesters, the strengths and weaknesses of this approach should become more clear. As one university professor stated in the early stages of a school/university collaboration project; "I'm all for the collaboration project, but last month we were sitting at the (middle school), they didn't have any idea who we were or why we were there. We didn't know them. The idea looks good on paper, but when it comes down to real people sitting in a room, God, there's a lot of work to do. I don't know if it's possible (Teitel, 1991)." The following guiding questions will form the basis for project evaluation.

Do students believe:

- they will succeed in teaching?
- the field experience was useful in preparation for student teaching?
- the field program was an improvement over taking the courses separately on campus?
- cooperating teachers in public schools were helpful?

Do cooperating teachers believe:

- the project was helpful for their own professional growth?
- project student provided meaning learning activities for their students?
- they help project students better understand the roles and responsibilities of a teacher?

The project assistant conducted interviews with student participants and cooperating teachers during the semester. Written transcripts of the taped interviews are used for assessing the success of project components. A survey instrument administered at the interim and end of the semester ranks student beliefs about their preparedness to teach. Additionally, each of the participants responses to pre and post administrations of a reflective practice instrument based upon Donald Shon's model of reflective practice will be compared (Kirby, 1985). It is anticipated that project participants will have a significant increase in their beliefs about teaching as measured by this survey.

Student Achievement Assessment

Assessment of student achievement for formative and grading purposes is ongoing and authentic. For an education student, the authentic performance for assessing progress is the act of teaching. The teaching act is defined in the most broadest sense to include research on teaching, planning, performance and reflection. A critical criterion for assessment is the growth of personal insight into teaching and their own performance over the course of the semester. Artifacts including multiple draft writings, plans, reflections, audio and video tapes along with samples of the work that children complete that help define and clarify their beliefs about teaching and learning are being accumulated by each person. These are collected in a portfolio available for inspection during the semester. As a culminating activity, each of the project participants present a summary of their progress to the entire class. Each participant may choose the form that the presentation takes but must include both visual and spoken

summaries of their best work. This is an opportunity for each of the participants to celebrate accomplishments and bring closure to a semester of intensive work.

Results

The Project faculty are providing instruction in the theoretical basis of teaching methods during lecture periods and then connecting that theory to practice in mentoring, tutoring and teaching situations. This integration approach is helping students gain a more holistic sense of the teaching profession than is possible with discrete courses. The cooperation of classroom teachers serving as mentors also grounds theory in teaching practice.

Student beliefs about the personal value of participation in the project remain overwhelmingly positive. A survey designed to measure student approval (Schivley, 1991) was administered to the student participants in project force. The responses to that survey are given in the following table:

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The cooperating teachers provided help when necessary.	16%	80%	4%	-	-
The university teachers provided guidance in preparation to teach.	92%	8%	-	-	-
The project was an improvement over taking courses separately on campus.	100%	-	-	-	-
I feel more confident that I will succeed in teaching.	88%	12%	-	-	-
The project prepared me for student teaching.	88%	12%	-	-	-
My overall value as a perspective teacher is higher.	96%	4%	-	-	-

This survey indicates Project FORCE participants feel very strongly about the value of their participation in the project. Although the participants view about the helpfulness of cooperating teachers is not as strong as some of the other statements. 96% of the participants felt that the cooperating teachers are helpful and no one disagreed with that statement. University teachers faired better with 92% strongly agreeing that their guidance is useful. The 8% who marked agree were primarily concerned about the level of involvement by all the university teachers. This is understandable because of the uneven distribution of course loads for each professor between Project FORCE and campus-based courses. There is unanimous agreement that participation in the project is more valuable an experience over campus courses. All participants also (strongly agree, 88%; agree, 12%) believe that they are better prepared and more able to succeed in

teaching. Students in the project feel that participation in Project FORCE will raise their value as a perspective teacher (strongly agree, 96%; agree, 4%). Overall, students either strongly agree or agree with the value of the project in all categories except one person who remains unconvinced about the helpfulness of the cooperating teachers.

The results of this survey closely match the qualitative findings. Students expressed a positive attitude during personal interviews[1]. When asked what they believed was different about Project FORCE compared to campus-based classes, most of the students commented on how much more practical experience they believed they were receiving. "I feel like I've taught more lessons now than I would get to had I taken all of these classes on campus," said Ann. Sharon has had a campus-based methods class previously. "It was a good class, but we only got into the classroom two times. And my whole feeling that sums it up is that if you are going to learn how to teach, there's no better way to learn how to teach than to get out there and teach it," she said. Don agreed, "If you're going to learn any kind of skill you just got to get in there and get involved. That's what this project allows us students to do." Rose explained it from a different view point. "Every lesson plan we plan actually has a purpose. We can go do that lesson." "Doing the Project FORCE you have lectures which give the content and theories, but you also have to go into the classroom and see how they work and get to plan them yourself. So it's more beneficial to us as practicing teachers to

[1]The names used in this paper are not the real names of project *force* participants.

work with students than to hear about how they should work," summarized Chuck.

Many of the students also believed Project FORCE provided for more of a community of learners than campus based methods classes do. For example, Dave said, "I feel we're more of a community of learners. We share our ideas, our thoughts, as opposed to someone you sit next to for fifty minutes." Sue explained it this way, "There's a lot more teamwork, a lot of cooperation." Molly stated it simply, "We learn from one another."

Another consistent difference stated by the students was the variety of experiences Project FORCE offered them compared to the experiences offered in campus-based methods classes. "We get to go into the public schools. We get to work with a lot of socioeconomic classes of students. See the differences in them," explained Molly. Sue feels there are more opportunities available because they are in the school building. "Like with the music teacher asking us to fill in," she said. "There's just been teachers that have popped up and asked us to do little things, and you're more involved with the school and how everything works." Many students mentioned how having the classroom teachers making presentations and four professors with different opinions provided them with a variety of view points on teaching. From these, they were able to mold their own philosophies.

When the students were asked how this field-based semester prepared them for their student teaching experience, most of them described how their experiences in Project FORCE have made them feel more prepared, more confident, and more comfortable with teaching. For example, Magi said, "I feel

that I'm going to be more prepared because I am in the classroom more than I would be over on campus. Because on campus we're learning what to do in the classroom and we're getting lots of ideas, but over in the lab school we're getting to put them to the test." Sue explained that, "it's just your confidence level is so much higher because you're getting little bits and pieces at a time and you're not overwhelmed all at once." Bob described his experience this way, "I've learned a lot from being in the classroom. And it's a lot different than observing because I can observe somebody fixing a car, but I can't fix one. And this way, I not only get to observe, but I'm actually taking part while I'm observing. So for my student teaching, it's preparing me for children."

The students were also asked what they felt should remain the same or be changed in the program. Most of the students felt scheduling was a problem especially with the tutoring. The cooperating teachers organize their schedules around fixed events, e.g. recess, lunch, art, music, and their preference for the order of science, math, social studies and language arts. It is difficult to accommodate the needs of multiple classrooms and still preserve common time for the FORCE students to meet as a whole group or in small groups. As far as what should remain the same, most of the students felt the time in the classrooms and the public schools should remain the same or be increased. Amy explained why, "I think we've learned the most when we've actually been in the class or actually trying to teach a lesson." Some of the students said what should remain the same is the project itself. "I think they should continue to do it. I mean, a lot of people aren't going to get this opportunity that we have. And I feel really sorry for those people that don't get this opportunity," stated Laurie.

The teachers from the laboratory school and the public schools were asked about how the Project FORCE students provided meaningful learning activities for their students. Most of the laboratory school teachers described the tutoring or mentoring and the lessons the FORCE students did. The third grade teacher also mentioned the debate the FORCE students helped her students do. The sixth grade teacher discussed the FORCE students' participation in the Summit Conference. "It was just so helpful, and they were actually right in an experience where they had to think quickly and work with students, stimulate students, motivate students...," she said.

The public school teachers discussed how the FORCE students worked with students one-on-one, in small groups, and in whole groups. Often, the FORCE students were given the opportunity to take charge of the class for a few days. "They took total charge, did a wonderful job," said Pam Scott about the two FORCE students in her classroom.

When asked how they helped Project FORCE students better understand the roles and responsibilities of a teacher, most of the teachers discussed how they allowed the FORCE students to teach lessons, handle discipline problems, and be in charge of their classes. "We let them be in charge of the class because we think the best way you can learn is by experience," Angie Lock explained. The teachers also discussed how they thought being in the schools all day helped the FORCE students understand the realities of teaching. "I think it was very invaluable experience as far as seeing how a classroom runs from the beginning of the day to stay with those students all the way to the end," said Wendy

Johnson. "Just rubbing shoulders with the experiences all day long everyday is the best teacher we can have," stated Mrs. Fredricks.

The teachers were also asked how Project FORCE was helpful for their own professional growth. Many of them commented on how having a student teacher in their classrooms made them more aware of how they were teaching. "It causes me, I think, to question what I am doing. Plus before I even begin, it causes me to think through the types of activities I'm telling them would work with boys and girls," explained Mrs. Brown. They also discussed how Project FORCE students brought new and refreshing ideas with them. "She brought new ideas and new activities that I've never seen. And so it was kind of an enlightening experience just to see how she did things. All of us can learn something from something else," said Mr. Smith about the FORCE student in his classroom. Mrs. Fredricks explained how working with FORCE students made her feel about being a teacher. "It just makes me feel good about my profession in that I see all these ambitious bright young people working so hard to do their very best and to be so concerned about our children and their learning."

Conclusions

The quest for providing more meaningful experiences for pre-student teaching elementary education majors is successful to this point. As pointed out by Ebb, et. al. (1981), the construction of new concepts must be closely related to practice in order to have personal meaning for the learner. The participants in

this project are overwhelmingly positive about the value of their experience. They are in a real way connecting theory to practice.

These findings seem to be similar to those in less ambitious field-based pre-student teaching projects. Becham (1991) obtained survey results similar to those obtained with this project. The participants in their field-based program expressed a preference for the field-based semester over a more campus-based approach. Students in Project FORCE are excited about teaching, enjoy working in the schools and believe that this is a personally enriching experience. Preliminary analysis of data gathered from a variety of sources indicates that the goals of the project are being met.

A number of issues must continue to be explored. The question of whether this project is sustainable over a longer period of time and/or should be expanded must be addressed. Sustaining the project will require faculty dedicated to a more holistic approach to pre-student teaching experiences. Expanding the program would require changing role of the university faculty from being the organizer of instructional activities to coach and coordinator. This approach may not appeal to all persons. A high level of commitment to working with teachers and administrators in public schools in also necessary. Evaluation of student achievement through performance based assessment techniques will require a rethinking of the way in which the curriculum for special teaching method courses is organized. It seems, however, that all of these concerns are worth struggling with if the end result is elementary education students who are bettered prepared for student teaching and will ultimately become better classroom teachers.

In summary, it appears the goal of the project to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a field-based pre-student teaching semester are being met. Problems in this approach to the preparation of elementary education majors for teaching appear to be mainly technical. Scheduling diverse activities while still being able to preserve common time for large group discussion is difficult at best. Cooperating teachers within the laboratory school are willing to work with the students as much as possible. Project students view the fixed times for content area activities within classes as an unnecessarily restraint on mentoring/tutoring and teaching encounters. The overall response, however, is extremely positive as demonstrated by the survey results and statements made during interviews. The most telling sign is that all of the participants view this field-based experience a one that meets their needs better than a campus-based program.

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