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ABSTRACT

Fifty-seven elementary education students enrolled in methods courses were asked to respond to an open-ended questionnaire to identify what knowledge and skills had been learned as a result of participating in field experiences required in the courses. Students provided 516 individual statements, with 245 being knowledge statements, which included facts or concepts about teaching and learning in schools, knowledge of educational environments, and knowledge of self as a beginning professional, and 271 being skill statements, which included action by the student in professional activity, teaching in a particular content area, acting in context, and professional development. Knowledge statements were primarily associated with professional information related to teaching and content to be taught during field assignments. This is in contrast to knowledge identified by beginning field students who emphasized knowledge associated with career exploration and educational contexts. Skills developed made up more than 50 percent of students' statements and were directly linked to the delivery of classroom instruction in field sites. Field experiences just prior to student teaching seem to differ from those provided at the beginning of a teacher education program in terms of curriculum and instructional emphasis. (Contains 12 references.) (Author/JDD)

Early Field Experience: Contributions of the Methods Courses

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Early Field Experience: The Contribution of the Methods Courses

Abstract

Fifty seven elementary education students enrolled in methods courses over a two year period were asked to respond to an open-ended questionnaire to identify what had been learned in each of three categories: knowledge, skills, and other information as a result of participating in field experiences required in the courses. The major findings indicate that field experiences prior to student teaching contribute to approximately 50% of the knowledge statements. Knowledge is primarily associated with professional information related to teaching and content to be taught during field assignments. This is in contrast to knowledge identified by beginning field students who emphasized knowledge associated with career exploration and educational contexts. Skills developed make up more than 50% of the statements made by students and are directly linked to the delivery of classroom instruction in field sites. Clearly, field experiences just prior to student teaching differ from those provided at the beginning of a teacher education program in terms of curriculum and instruction emphasis.

Early Field Experience: Contribution of the Methods Courses

Introduction

National educational initiatives have focused on all aspects of education. A number of reforms target the field and clinical component of teacher education programs. Holmes institutions emphasize field experience in professional development schools. (Holmes, 1986, p. 95). A number of colleges and universities have initiated professional development schools. (AACTE, 1992) The Renaissance Group encourages involvement with schools. Professional standards boards support substantial pre-service teacher involvement in schools. (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 1991, p. 3) Accreditation agencies emphasize focused field experiences for quality teacher education programs. (NCATE, 1994, p.3)(NASTEC, 1989, p.13) Clearly field experience is viewed as an important component of teacher development.

A variety of experiences by students and beginning teachers in schools currently exists. Pre-student teaching experiences are required in many teacher preparation programs. Student teaching is a universal requirement for teacher certification. Likewise various teacher induction programs exist for beginning teachers. (Becher, 1987) These induction programs are attempts to socialize the beginning teacher and provide opportunities to assess the professional capabilities prior to certification. (Schlechty, 1985).

Field experiences are a part of teacher education programs from the beginning of education coursework through the early years of employment in the profession. It is important to determine the knowledge base provided by field experiences. This study examines the knowledge and skills identified by students after they completed methods coursework prior to student teaching. It is designed as a follow up to a previous study of

beginning teacher education students.(Heath, 1994) The purpose of the study is to develop further understanding of student beliefs about the knowledge and skills acquired while teaching in the schools. This should more clearly define what types of knowledge and skills are a part of field experience curriculum. This is important to establish a scope and sequence for the teacher education field and clinical components. The earlier study showed that beginning teacher education students spoke primarily about knowledge they acquired while in the field. While they developed skills, these were not the primary outcomes of their field experience. The questions for this study are:

1. Do students acquire knowledge during field experiences in the areas of a) professional knowledge, b) content knowledge, c) context knowledge, and d) personal knowledge?
2. Do students acquire skills during field experiences in the areas of a) professional skills, b) content skills, c) context skills, and d) personal skills?
3. Do students acquire personal knowledge and/or skills during field experiences?

Methods

Participants

The 57 participants in this study were enrolled in an elementary education program on a regional campus of a major university in the midwest. The students selected for the study were in their senior year and were taught by four different university faculty. The data collected were for selected students in two academic years. The courses were in the areas of reading and language arts, science, math, and social studies. Each course contained a well

defined in-school field component. The study included students in three blocks. In the first year data were collected for 33 students in a science social studies block. In year two data were collected for eight students in a math and reading education combination and sixteen students in a language arts, science and social studies combination.

The first group consisted of 33 undergraduate students enrolled in both a 4 quarter hour science and a 4 quarter hour social studies methods course in the elementary education program with an integrated science and social studies field component. Students attended six weeks of on campus methods followed by three weeks of field experience in local school sites. The final week of class was held on campus. Students were asked to make one previsit to the field site prior to teaching in the classroom to determine the content to be prepared, observe students, and the class. The students taught in a peer group of two or three. Students worked together and assisted peers during the actual teaching phase of the experience while one student was responsible for preparation and delivery of instruction. Students prepared and taught three consecutive integrated science-social studies lessons. Teaching involved pupil grouping, hands on experiences, and decision making. In addition students were required to develop selected classroom activities. During the final week of class students shared prepared units and written observations with peers. Students completed approximately 35-40 hours in the field site in an open school site within the area.

The second group consisted of 24 students enrolled in 3-4 hour methods courses arranged in blocks. Each class met twice a week. Students were placed in either a primary or middle grade field site for at least 60 hours during a ten week quarter. Generally, during the third week, students spent approximately 8 hours per week in assigned school sites for one or two days per week. Students normally had both a primary and a middle grade field experience prior to student teaching.

Field assignments for the math and reading combination included four graded lesson plans involving manipulatives for learning mathematics previously taught to peers in a formal university class. Reading assignments included four graded lesson plans and a portfolio case-study of a child's reading. Students collected product and process data with at least two authentic samples of literacy events. Students analyzed samples of print knowledge, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing and suggested methods and activities to support the child's literacy development. Students also reported pertinent factors which could potentially influence the child's progress and collected whole-class portfolio process and product data. Students developed a lesson plan for developing print knowledge (decoding), vocabulary meaning, comprehension, and writing, reviewed the plan in class, and taught the respective lessons in the assigned classroom.

The field requirements for the social studies, language arts, science combination included

specific requirements in each of the content areas. In social studies students were expected to complete an analysis of a curriculum guide or course of study, prepare several lesson plans with at least one to be taught in the classroom, and develop a social studies learning center. In language arts students were expected to develop a portfolio case-study of at least one child, collect product and process data using at least two samples of literacy or language arts events and authentic samples from other children in class. Students analyzed samples of listening, speaking, reading and writing in terms of language arts developmental theory, suggested methods and activities supporting a child's language arts progress, and reported other pertinent factors. Students developed an integrated unit and planned four lessons. Field requirements in science included a textbook analysis, three detailed lessons plans, a letter developed for parents introducing a new science unit regarding a home science activity, and a critique of a trade book, or a case study of one child's knowledge of science ideas. Students wrote a reflective journal once a week in response to the field experience, considered problem solving ideas, and expressed individual concerns.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research involves the use of both qualitative and descriptive methods. Qualitative methods were selected, in part, because they enabled examination of significant questions, processes and relationships, without necessarily testing them (Marshall and Rossman, 1989).

Inductive and phenomenological strategies were used to gather and analyze of preservice student statements. This research employs a survey type interview of preservice teachers. An interview qualifies as a qualitative method according the Eisner & Peshkin (1990). Flexibility is important as one attempts to illuminate, describe and interpret what the data suggests. Qualitative research is relatively devoid of canons and conventions. Its procedures tend to be unique and based on the circumstances and particular problems. The descriptive data is reported in tables using frequencies and percentages. This tabular display was done to enable a comparison with a previous study. Effort was made to compare the data to previous research to support reliability and validity of this investigation.

Following the field component of each course section, each student was asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire to explain what had been learned in each of three categories: knowledge, skills, and other information about their specific experience including interaction with the environment and the people within it. The framework for sorting and analyzing the data included a three-tiered classification. Data were initially categorized according to knowledge and skills on the basis of key words in the student responses and the context in which the statements were made. (e.g. course content, planning). In the second tier, data in each of these areas were reclassified into professional knowledge or professional skill, knowledge about content , or skill associated with content, knowledge of context, or

skills developed in a particular context, and knowledge of self or specific skills personally developed. (Self emerged as a category to include those personal statements students made about their development as beginning professionals.) The classification scheme was used across the two areas of knowledge and skills (e.g. professional knowledge, skills knowledge, content knowledge, content skill). This is consistent in style with the framework used by Shulman (1986, 1987); Shulman and Grossman(1988) in which knowledge was organized into eight domains. The third tier of the framework includes reclassification of the data further according to additional criteria as indicated in Tables 2 and 3.

Frequencies were calculated and are reported in tables. Exemplar student responses were selected for most of the cells of the framework and are reported to illustrate both the use of the criteria in the classification of responses and the richness of student responses overall.

Results and Discussion

Knowledge. A total of 57 teacher education students responded to the questionnaire. These students provided 516 individual statements reported in Tables 1, 2 and 3 within the major categories knowledge and skills and then subcategories within each of these. The major categories (first tier) include (a) knowledge (facts or concepts about teaching and learning in schools, knowledge of educational environments, and knowledge of self as a beginning professional) and (b) skills (action by student in professional activity, teaching in a

particular content, acting in context , and professional development.

Student responses by number and percentages within the two major categories knowledge and skills are indicated in Table 1. Of the 516 student statements 271 (52.5%) are responses about skills developed. Knowledge statements make up 245 (47.5%) of the total re ponses.

Professional knowledge statements are classified into subcategories including general teaching, discipline, teaching content, students/pupils and other teachers. These data are shown in Table 2. The sum of student responses in the professional knowledge subcategories is 129 or 52.7% of the total knowledge statements. This indicates that students believe they are acquiring information about the teaching - learning process. Examples of student statements in this category are:

" I learned that one has to break the habit of certain slang words such as 'you guys' because they are unprofessional in the classroom".

"I learned how departmentalizing works in an elementary school."

"Understanding all the work the teacher has to do."

"A discipline system which works for the regular teacher is not always transferable to a substitute or student teacher."

"Discipline and control of a classroom."

"I learned some of the realistic pressures on teachers for using basal texts and workbooks."

"The importance of student prediction"

"I learned what an asset fellow teachers can be, particularly in an open classroom."

"The students are challenging-as they know their information."

Student's knowledge of content is indicated by 46 or 18.8% of total knowledge statements. Students commented on having to learn the content they were expected to teach. Among the areas on which the students commented were:

" Scandinavian countries: content in social studies chapters"

" Biomes"

"The units we taught were in Ohio history and the solar system. I have to refresh myself with the facts and learn new things that had been discovered since I was in school. For example, Pluto is not always the last planet in our solar system."

" Knowledge of children's literature appropriate for subject areas."

There are 31 statements or 12.7% of the total knowledge statements about new knowledge associated with the context or site in which the student was placed. Field assignments include placement at various grade levels. One class was placed in an open school. There were no student placements in special education sites. Responses included:

"I have learned a lot about open classrooms."

"Open classrooms do not lend themselves to noisy activities."

"Basic institutions such as family."

"Use of time when rotating classes at W_"

"I observed how well sixth graders work in groups. They may talk a lot, but they get the work and do it."

"I think that most of the teaching in that school contradicted what were learning."

Of the knowledge statements, there were 39 statements or 15.9% of total knowledge statements that can be classified as personal knowledge. Personal knowledge statements are those which refer to what students learn about themselves while teaching. Examples include:

"Reinforced my positive attitude towards children."

"My attitudes are more positive towards my own abilities."

"I finally know that I want to be a teacher more than anything else."

"A preference for closed classroom"

"I can handle 5 graders."

"Working with first grade students helped me to become aware of the importance of big books."

"Better feelings about upper grade students"

"I found that I wouldn't mind teaching lower grades (first or second).

"Increased understanding and appreciation for individual student contact."

In summary, student knowledge statements show that professional knowledge about teaching, content, and context is being acquired during course related field experiences. Students acquire general knowledge about teaching and specific content they are asked to teach. They are still refining career choices and forming preferences with regard to grade level and school organization.

Skills. Students made 271 statements about skills developed in course related field experiences. This represents 52.5% of the total skill responses. These statements have been further categorized as professional, content, context, and personal skills. These data are shown in Table 3.

Professional skills are those specific skills related directly to classroom instruction and are listed in descending order by frequency and percents. 196 students listed the acquisition of professional skills for 72.3% of all skill responses. Student comments suggest that they acquired skills in planning, organizing, developing an activity or unit that integrates content by and with groups, and in evaluation. In addition, they learned observation, communication, discipline, questioning, pacing, and classroom discipline.

Specific skills related to a specific content areas such as reading, science, etc. are

reported in the broader context, skills associated with teaching content. Student statements show 9 responses in this subcategory or 3.3% of the total skill responses of these comments and includes such examples as:

"Reading assessment-portfolio development"

"Reading in several ways"

"Integration of science and social studies concepts"

"Doing a science module"

Students statements also indicate skill development associated with a specific or unique characteristics of a site(context.) There are 9 skills statements (3.3% of the total skill responses) within this category. For example, students said,

"(I developed) discipline skills,(open school) was a real challenge to my discipline methods and the teachers said my methods worked very well."

Personal professional growth statements included statements about changes in attitudes or attributes by an individual and general statements about the classroom. The subcategory "Other" includes student statements which could not be classified into one of the other subcategories. Personal professional growth statements totaled 57 or 21.% of the total skill statements. Student responses to their teaching experience included such remarks as:

"My attitude about teaching science is more positive now that I have taught

science."

"My attitude toward science has improved even more because the students were genuinely interested in the materials when activities and experiments were incorporated to reinforce concepts."

"I feel more confident about teaching science and social studies"

"Tolerance"

"Flexibility"

In summary student skill statements focus primarily on professional knowledge and secondarily to those skills used to teach specific content. There was some indication that students learned some skills because of unique placements. Additionally there were some comments regarding personal development.

Discussion

Knowledge statements represent nearly half (47.7%) of the total comments made by students. Of these, 52.7% were identified as professional knowledge. Clearly students enrolled in methods courses are still developing the knowledge base for teaching. In 18.5% of the statements students indicated a need to learn or relearn content that they were to teach. Science and social studies content were areas mentioned most often. The absence of math content statements suggests a need for further investigation in this area. Statements about

context represent 12.7% of those made within knowledge. Student responses indicated that their knowledge of schools and grade levels was linked directly with their experience in varied sites and levels. Special education sites were not included for these placements; however, some students did teach in urban sites. Personal statements represent 16.9% of the knowledge statements. These comments indicate that students are engaged in career decisions and deciding preferences for grade level and school organizational patterns.

In summary, an examination of student comments indicate that learning of new knowledge centers primarily on information that students find relevant to their particular field assignment. The majority of statements are associated with situations in which the student is actually teaching.

Skill statements comprise 54.2% of all the statements made. These statements (72.1%) focus primarily on professional skills. Of all statements made, 39.1% of the statements are directly related to the actual preparation and delivery of instruction in the classroom. Specific skills within particular content represented include 3.3% of the skills category. Skills developed for specific contexts were identified in 3.2% of the skill statements. Clearly skills that are developed are generic to the teaching experience. Personal skill statements represent 21.1% of all skill comments; however, general field statements about the site and "other" statements which are included in the data mask the personal development identified.

Personal skills including attitudes and attributes represent 5.9% of the category and more clearly show the degree of skill development in this area.

In summary, skill development statements indicate that students believe they have developed skills related to the delivery of instruction within a classroom. They are less concerned with skills within a specific content area or site in which they teach. They are aware of changes within themselves that occur as a result of their teaching interaction in the classroom.

Field experience provides a highly focused, but narrowly defined experience for the preservice teacher. Students views are made in response to their perceptions of what the experience means to them. Statements about content and context were found less frequently than in an earlier study of beginning teacher education students. It may be that concerns for content and/or context may increase as students become more comfortable with the delivery of classroom instruction in field experiences that provide more time in the classroom. These students clearly focused on knowledge and skills closely related to actual delivery of instruction in the classroom.

Implications

Early field experience provides preservice teachers with opportunities to consider career options within the profession. Teacher educators might enhance the vision of students by

planning experiences that include varied contexts, grade levels, and diverse student populations that occur throughout early field experiences. Students also begin to focus their attention on the actual process of teaching as they are required to participate in the delivery of classroom instruction. The potential learning opportunities linked to instruction should be explored by teacher educators to include optimum opportunities for students teaching in the field. Perhaps this curriculum might be developed in collaboration with cooperating teachers who provide the environment for additional instruction during student teaching. Knowledge linked with particular disciplines should be investigated more clearly to determine if knowledge and skills from all elementary content areas are represented in field experience teaching, if the design of field experiences linked is related to the student views of what was experienced, or if other factors influence student comments. Finally, preservice students should be provided with field experiences that allow for individual confidence building and personal development which occurs in the context of classroom teaching after preparation in the methods courses.

Table 1

Student Responses by Number and Percentages by Category

Category	N	%
Knowledge	245	47.5
Skills	271	52.5
Totals	516	100.0

Table 2
Student Knowledge Responses by Subcategory by Number and Percentages

Category and Subcategory	N	Subcategory%	Category %	Total %
Professional Knowledge				
General teaching	78	60.5	31.8	15.1
Teaching content	26	20.2	10.6	5.0
Pupils	13	10.1	5.3	2.5
Discipline	7	5.4	2.95	1.4
Other teachers	5	4.0	2.0	1.0
Subtotal	129	00.2%	52.7%	25.0%
Content Knowledge				
Social studies content	16	35.4	6.1	3.1
Science content	14	30.4	5.7	2.7
General statement	14	30.4	5.7	2.7
Reading/language content	2	4.3	.01	0.0
Math content	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Subtotal	46	100.5%	18.5%	8.5%
Context				
Level	17	54.8	6.9	3.3
Open	7	22.6	2.9	1.4
General environment	7	22.6	2.9	1.4
Special education	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
City/urban	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Subtotal	31	100%	12.7%	6.1%
Self				
General	19	48.7	7.8	3.7
Open site	17	43.6	7.9	3.3
Level of student	3	7.7	1.2	1.1
Urban site	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Special education	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Subtotal	39	100.%	16.9%	8.1%
Totals	129	100.7%	100.8%	47.7%

% are rounded

Table 3
Student Skill Responses by Subcategory by Number and Percentages

Category and Subcategory	N	Subcategory %	Category %	Total %
Professional Skills				
General instruction	58	30.1	21.4	11.2
Planning	23	11.7	8.5	4.5
Evaluation	21	10.7	7.7	4.1
Discipline	20	10.2	7.4	3.9
Organizing	15	7.7	5.5	3.0
Group work	14	7.1	5.2	2.7
Questioning	14	7.1	5.2	2.7
Activity	9	5.1	3.3	1.7
Pacing	6	3.1	2.2	1.2
Communication	5	2.6	1.8	1.1
Unit	4	2.0	1.4	1.0
Using media	4	2.0	1.4	1.0
Integrating	3	1.0	1.1	1.0
Observation	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Subtotals	196	100.4	72.1	39.1
Content Skills				
Teaching in language arts	5	55.6	1.8	1.1
Teaching in science	3	33.3	1.1	0.6
Teaching in social studies	1	11.1	0.4	0.0
Teaching in math	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Subtotals	9	100.0	3.3	1.7
Context Skills				
Teaching in open school	4	44.4	1.4	1.0
Teaching at given level	4	44.4	1.4	1.0
Teaching in specific context	1	11.1	0.4	0.0
Teaching in special education	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Teaching in urban area	0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Subtotals	9	99.9	3.2	2.0
Personal Skills				
General field statements	27	47.4	10.1	5.2
Other statements	14	25.1	5.2	2.7
Personal skills	13	22.8	4.8	2.5
Teaching attitudes	3	5.3	1.1	1.0
Subtotals	57	100.7	21.2	11.4

% are rounded

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