



Course Embedded Fieldwork: A Look at a Working Model

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the value of course embedded faculty-supervised fieldwork for pre-service teacher candidates. These candidates were enrolled in undergraduate literacy and special education courses at a small private liberal arts college. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to ascertain students' perceptions of course embedded fieldwork. Quantitative data were based on a Likert Scale survey; qualitative data were collected from written responses to two open ended questions. Additional data were collected from pupils in the classes where the teacher candidates worked. Results of the study pointed to the positive value of this fieldwork model.

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In New York State, teacher candidates must complete a prescribed number of fieldwork hours prior to student teaching. The pre-professional regulations require teacher candidates to complete at least 100 hours of field experiences related to coursework prior to student teaching for a single area of certification (e.g., childhood or adolescence) and at least 150 hours of fieldwork experiences for dual certification in either childhood/special education or adolescence/special education (NYSED, 2005). The latest report on the review of the No Child Left Behind law recommends "higher education institutions...set goals for more closely linking their instruction with the needs of schools and the demands new teachers face in the classroom" (Thompson & Barnes, 2007, p. 48).

The teacher preparation courses at the small private liberal arts college where we work use several models of course-embedded faculty supervised fieldwork to fulfill this requirement. Neither of us was familiar with course-embedded faculty supervised fieldwork for undergraduate education before working at this college. After our first year at the college, we understood the rationale for this fieldwork model from the perspective of college educators. However, we were interested in learning about our students' perspectives of this model.



While all higher education institutions require their candidates to complete pre-student teaching fieldwork hours, faculty supervised course-embedded fieldwork is not a state mandated requirement. At our college, two models of course-embedded fieldwork are consistently used. One model used in the literacy courses has teacher candidates on campus for four weeks, then in the field with one time per week for the next eight to ten weeks of the semester. During this eight to ten week period, faculty directly supervise and coach candidates as they work in individual classrooms, usually one on one with children. In the context of the college classroom, candidates learn instructional strategies focused on literacy and how to plan and implement effective literacy lessons. Research-based instruction is central to these literacy courses. The fieldwork model used in the special education courses has the candidates on campus for approximately the first seven to eight weeks of the semester, then in the field for two sessions per week for four to five weeks. Again, the candidates are directly supervised and coached by the college faculty member. The special education methods course focuses on research based instructional methods of direct instruction, suitable for students with disabilities.

Overview of Faculty Supervised Course-Embedded Fieldwork

Teachers need opportunities to combine research-based practices with practical experiences (Levine, 1992). The college classroom provides the theoretical basis for practice, but it “does not call upon [teachers] to transform those findings for real situations “ (Levine, 1992, p. 11). The issue of teachers rarely having the opportunity to leave their egg crate classroom existence once they assume full-time employment has been recognized for many years (Lortie, 1975). This lack of opportunity to see and be seen by colleagues does not promote conversations about teaching practices and hence teachers tend to perpetuate their existing practices (Darling-Hammond, 1992). Therefore, we suggest that course-embedded fieldwork serves the needs of the pre-service teacher by attempting to establish a climate of collegiality that is necessary to promote collaborative contexts once the teachers are employed in schools (Hargreave, 1993). Our teacher candidates are in the process of developing teacher identities (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006). We believe they need opportunities to engage in guided reflections on their teaching practices. Course-embedded fieldwork supports the opportunity for reflection with peers guided by faculty.

In a previous qualitative study (Cowan & McCloskey, 2004), graduate students who were teacher candidates in literacy reported that course-embedded faculty supervised fieldwork afforded them the opportunity to form collegial relationships that enhanced their professional knowledge. These kinds of relationships between professionals help teacher candidates at pre-service and in-service levels become more reflective about their practice.

Data Collection

For the present study, teacher candidates in four undergraduate classes were surveyed about the positive or negative value of course-embedded faculty supervised



fieldwork. Two literacy course sections and two special education course sections were included in our study. There were 44 female students and 4 male students in the two sections of the literacy courses, most of whom were sophomores. Similarly, in the special education courses there were 48 female students and 6 male students, most of whom were juniors or seniors. In all sections of these courses, all students were traditional undergraduates .

At the end of the semester after all fieldwork was finished, teacher candidates responded to a survey with a Likert Scale rating the value of fieldwork, as well as responding to two open-ended questions regarding the positive and negative aspects of fieldwork from their perspective. In order to obtain valid responses, teacher candidates were instructed that all surveys would be anonymous. Additionally, children in one of the fieldwork sites for a literacy course were asked to respond to two open-ended questions about the positive and negative experiences they had working with their college tutors. The children who responded were in grade three of a bilingual education class. There were 24 children, more than half of whom were going to be transitioned to general education classes the following school year. The pupil-generated responses allowed triangulation of the data obtained from the teacher candidates. Using these multiple sources of data provided the opportunity to view faculty supervised course-embedded fieldwork through the lenses of the various stakeholders in the study (Mathison, 1988).

The quantitative questions asked pre-service teachers to rate the following statements: 1) Fieldwork embedded in a course is a positive feature of the education programs at Mount Saint Mary College; 2) Fieldwork helps me see my peers working and that gives me confidence when I work with pupils; 3) I dislike doing fieldwork when it is course embedded because I think my professor spends too much time observing and not enough time helping the Mount students; 4) I will be better prepared when I teach because of course embedded fieldwork; 5) I have not learned anything from doing course embedded fieldwork. It is a waste of my time. Each statement was rated on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being strongly agree, 2 being agree, 3 being neutral, 4 being disagree somewhat, and 5 being strongly disagree.

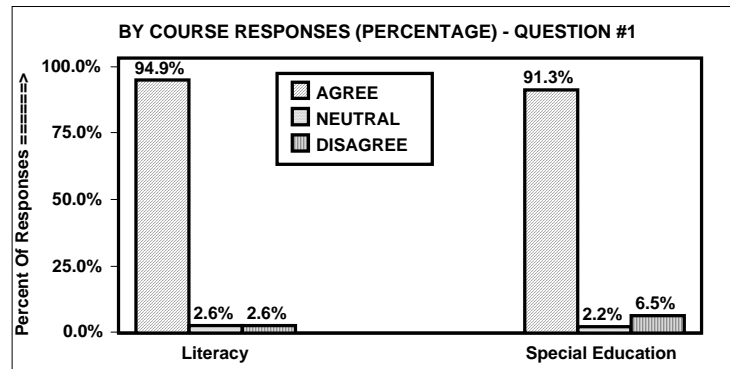
Findings

The Likert Scale data were compiled in Microsoft Excel and analyzed to compare responses. For purposes of analysis, *strongly agree* and *agree* were aggregated, as were *disagree* and *strongly disagree*. For question 1, responses in all course sections were overwhelmingly positive, indicating that teacher candidates do value the course-embedded fieldwork component of their courses. Data showed that 94.9% of respondents in the literacy course and 91.3% of respondents in the special education course indicated that they agreed that course-embedded fieldwork was valuable.



FIGURE 1

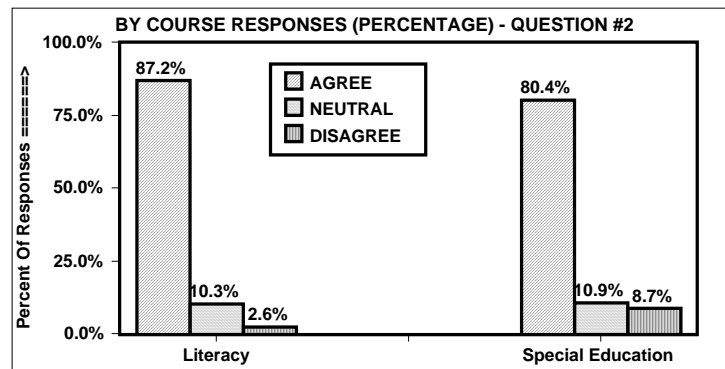
Question 1 Responses by Course: Fieldwork embedded in a course is a positive feature of the education programs at (Name) College.



Responses to question 2 were also positive, with 87.2% in the literacy course and 80.4% in the special education course.

FIGURE 2

Responses by Course: Fieldwork helps me see my peers working and that gives me confidence when I work with pupils.

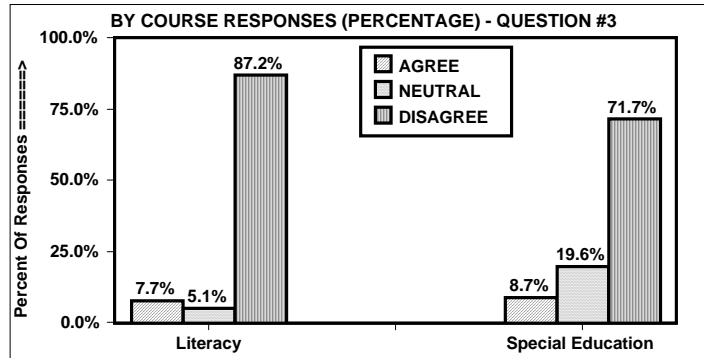


Question 3 was worded as the inverse of question 1; therefore responses were negative, as would be expected. In the literacy course, 87.2% of informants indicated responses of disagree and strongly disagree; 71.7% of the respondents in the special education course reported the same.



FIGURE 3

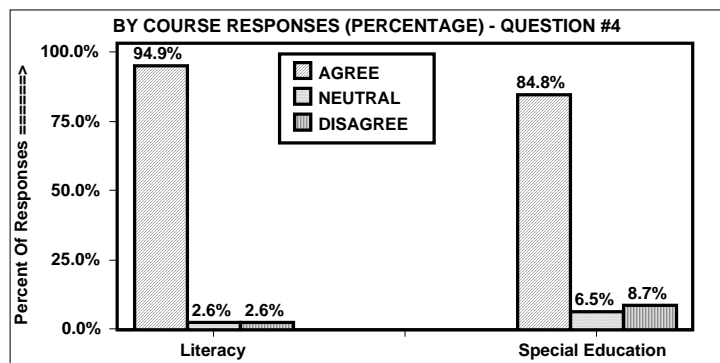
Course Responses: I dislike doing fieldwork when it is course embedded because I think my professor spends too much time observing and not enough time helping the (college) students.



Question 4 asked teacher candidates to evaluate their preparedness for teaching; responses in the literacy course (94.9%) and the special education course (84.8%) were positive in this regard.

FIGURE 4

Responses by Course: I will be better prepared when I teach because of course embedded fieldwork.



Like question 3, question 5 was worded as an inverse. As expected, responses were negative in both cases, with candidates in the literacy course having a response rate of 94.9% and a rate of 89.1% in the special education course.

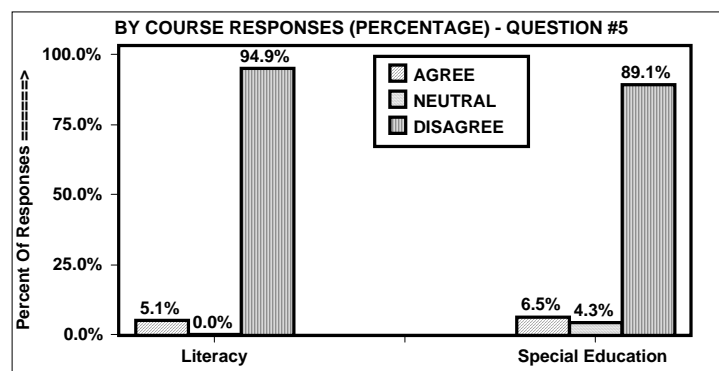
The data for question 5 indicate a difference in responses between students in literacy and special education courses. These differences were most likely attributable to



the context of the field placements. The literacy fieldwork was held in a setting where children had more regular school attendance. The special education fieldwork was held in a setting where the students' attendance was more sporadic. Candidates whose students did not attend school regularly expressed frustration with the erratic attendance.

FIGURE 5

Responses by Course: I have not learned anything from doing course embedded fieldwork. It is a waste of my time.



The qualitative data were obtained from responses to the following questions: The first question posed was *What two things stand out as being the most important to contribute to your own learning about teaching and pupils' learning as you think about your fieldwork in this course?* The second question was *What two things stand out as possible negative experiences when you think about your fieldwork in this course?*

In order to evaluate the data for these two questions, responses were coded into categories that were later collapsed as review continued (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Final categories for responses to the first question about the positive contributions of fieldwork included: classroom management; using methods from class; learning about students in first hand experiences; learning how schools work; and gaining confidence as a prospective teacher. The following categories emerged in responses to the second question about negative aspects of fieldwork: wanted more time in fieldwork; scheduling because of other classes; lack of pupil cooperation; and the absence of children.

In one literacy course fieldwork site, participating children were asked to respond to two open-ended questions. These questions were: 1.) What did you like about working and learning with the [name of college] student? and 2.) Was there anything you did not like about working and learning with the [name of college] student? The responses from the children were overwhelmingly positive. All of the children reported that they enjoyed the experience of working with college teacher candidates and were grateful for the individualized extra help; there were no negative comments. Some of the responses were written in Spanish and translated to English by the classroom teacher.



Sample comments from the children in reply to the first question about what they liked about working with their college friends included the following: “I like the pomes, storys, and the word card games”; “I like when we working and we Reading the books”; and “What I liked about Miss L is she was nice to me, helped me improve on things, and she took her time to help me.” Sample comments from the children in reply to the second question about what could be improved when working with their college friends included: “You don’t need to improve her”; “There is nothing to make better”; and “Yes, because I wanted them to be my spelling teacher forever.”

Answers from the teacher candidates to the first open-ended question used to explore a qualitative response about positive aspects of the faculty supervised course embedded fieldwork included the following sample comments: “You are able to see first-hand how a classroom is run. The fieldwork reinforces the material taught in class”; “Seeing the way teachers approach the early morning activities”; “Teachers at fieldwork were nice and helpful, and provided appropriate information” “Students were in need and required the extra help” “The strategies we used and the poetry we worked on with the students”; “ The most important thing is having experience and accepting criticism and feedback for what good or bad you have done to better improve yourself”; and “Hands on learning is the best! Being in a live/functioning classroom/more confidence.”

Sample comments in response to the second question posed to the teacher candidates about the negative experiences of faculty supervised course embedded fieldwork included the following: “Become close with the student and then leave”; “Sometimes feeling rushed, not enough time”; “negative experiences is not having enough time to get to a school site and not having sufficient time spent with a student in fieldwork”; and “Not all children want to behave/learn all the time. Some days, my child refused to work at all.”

Reflections

This study provides several suggestions for implementation of faculty-supervised course embedded fieldwork for preservice teacher candidates. One suggestion is that in a course-embedded fieldwork model, professional learning is enhanced because preservice teacher candidates are able to develop their skills in a school setting in classrooms of certified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Another important feature of course-embedded fieldwork is the provision of scaffolded learning for beginning teachers; these teacher candidates gradually gained control of their lesson planning and confidence in implementation of their lessons. The communal context of shared fieldwork experiences provided opportunities for faculty-guided scaffolded conversations that allowed for in-depth analysis of classroom contexts and students. Additionally, this model provides a collegial context for teacher candidates to discuss their profession with peers as a precursor to forming collaborative relationships with colleagues once the candidates complete their college coursework. Finally, students in schools receive the benefits of one on one or small group tutoring when our teacher candidates work in classrooms in course-embedded faculty supervised fieldwork. This service to the surrounding



communities cannot be duplicated in other ways since students in the classrooms where the candidates work receive one on one attention from their college tutors. Teachers in the high needs school districts willingly accept teacher candidates into their classrooms every semester because of the individualized attention their students receive.

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