

A Pre-Research Field Work Partnership Agreement Will Benefit Literacy Research Project Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

Challenges exist between the university course professors, pre-service teachers, and field work partnerships in literacy education programs. This article discusses a need to create and implement a pre-research field work agreement to increase the efficiency of literacy research projects conducted between the university and the practicum school partnership. Based on collected formal and informal research, disconnects are hindering the overall literacy research project goals from being accomplished. Specific challenging issues that are identified include ensuring placement diversity, geographical issues, researcher access to records, and adequate placement opportunities within the needed content focus supported by a highly qualified mentor. Resolutions to the challenges can be better addressed if a systematic, organized pre-research field work partnership agreement is in place.

Key words: Literacy, Research, Partnership, Teacher Candidates, Field Work, Practicum

INTRODUCTION

Educational research is needed to identify and document best practices in teaching and learning. The findings from educational research endeavours can help us, both readers and academicians, monitor activities and support actions needed to address changes we experience in the world around us. Issues such as social mobility, health, and citizenship are just a few foci that can be studied using educational research. Education related decisions that are made regarding what happens in the world of education remain at the forefront of the renewal of our society (Dewey, 1916).

Promoting, engaging, and supporting authentic classroom partnerships between the university and pre-service teachers is one way that educational research can be accomplished. The task to bridge these partnerships was “modeled after the practitioner experiences of medical students in teaching hospitals, clinical practice in educator preparation involves carefully scaffolded learning to provide teacher candidates with concrete ways to connect theory to practice” (Roth, Decker, & Cooner, 2019, p. 5). When productive relationships exist between the university, pre-service teachers, and hosting field work sites, each entity can benefit from the opportunity to learn from one another as described in the *Exemplary Teacher Induction: An International Review* (Howe, 2006). Additionally, educational pedagogy can be improved and leave a lasting impact on students for generations.

However, challenges exist with organizational details that make up the foundation of these partnerships. More attention is needed to ensure specific research goals

that are set between the university and hosting schools are accomplished. Current educators can view extra research partnerships with pre-service teachers as extra work. Teacher mentors are often busy in their teaching assessments. With more streamlined organization between the partnerships, pre-service teachers could be included in daily classroom tasks. The pre-service teacher’s additional help in the classroom can support student growth. Thus, these partnerships may seem more worthwhile.

Additionally, pre-service teachers placed with a mentor teacher outside of the university campus often struggle with balancing multiple responsibilities. Some pre-service teachers need scaffolding from the course professor to be successful in the field work situations. If the professor is not available at the field-work sites, students may feel unconfident. Pre-service teachers, who are learning to develop communication skills, will need to demonstrate confident professional discourse in placements. Thus, pre-service teachers may not feel comfortable establishing these skills alone. University course professors can be disconnected from the student lead research when they are attempting to balance research, teaching, and other responsibilities. The professors can be seen as outsiders when they visit the hosting schools. This disconnect can make research more difficult.

In an attempt to avoid frustrations and promote productive educational research, the idea of designing and implementing a pre-research field-work partnership agreement became the focus of this study. Reoccurring issues were analyzed to help outline what a pre-research field work partnership agreement

should consist of. Experiences drawn from implementing a literacy research project were collected and organized. It was the challenges observed that formed the findings that revealed specific items that should be considered when designing the pre-research field work partnership agreement.

The following research questions were posed:

1. What are the specific communication disconnects that are causing issues with literacy research partnerships?
2. What are the essential next steps to be taken that will support educators attempting to conduct literacy research partnerships?

SUPPORTING LITERATURE

There is a disconnect between pre-service teachers, educators, and overarching goals in education (Holt, 2016; Holt & Sasser, 2019; Sasser & Holt, 2018). Additionally, specific data reveals that students and teachers feel disconnected with educational information that they believe could support success. Without feeling informed there is unwanted stress (Holt, 2016) and a feeling of inadequacy among educators. This disconnect between educators is not productive for professional partnerships. In an ideal situation, the partnership between universities and schools should strengthen all parties by supporting identified needs (Lillejord & Børte, 2016). Since a problem exists with identifying needs, an understanding of the interrelation factors identified with communication is an important to recognize to avoid extra stress experienced by educators (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). Overall, extra stress can lead to a severing of the partnerships altogether.

To serve as a connection between higher education teacher preparation programs and authentic classroom learning experiences, school-based educators are often asked to mentor a university student. This time is known as a practicum, internship, or apprentice experience. This internship experience is not something that can be easily replicated using alternative methods of collaboration. Darragh, Picanco, Tully, & Henning (2011) state that “the emphasis of clinical field experience is a component that distinguishes quality programs” (p. 85). Therefore, it is important that we explore ways to improve relationships by focusing on creating and implementing a tool that can bridge gaps.

To further elaborate the need to ensure a successful field work practicum is in place, we must consider accreditation related goals that must be achieved. In order for higher education entities to be accredited and recognized as a high performing institution that can certify educators to serve in the school settings, specific standards must be met by the educational institution. These standards focus on ensuring specific qualities are systematically in place in the teacher education programs that can support success with the partnerships between the pre-service teacher educator and the hosting practicum field work sites. The goal to complete literacy course work that aligns with the requirements for state licensure and accreditation purposes demand that efficient time is spent in the classrooms working on hands-on learning opportunities (CAEP, 2013). Therefore, the goal of partnerships is not a mere option.

The connections between the university and field work sites that provide a hands-on learning experience for pre-service teacher candidates has an already developed body of literature that validate the importance. However, the call for researchers to create and implement a pre-research tool is unique. The relationships with higher education, field work connections, and research goals is important (Enderlin-Lampe, 2002). Maintaining reflective relationships with university partnerships that can help understand the characteristics of those [educators] who might be participating (Fisler & Firestone, 2006) is valued.

METHODOLOGY

The literacy research project communication challenges were identified and analyzed using a case study approach. The case study observational data collected when implementing literacy related field work projects required of pre-service teachers illuminated disconnects. The data collected from observations and conversations helped identify reoccurring themes. While the focus of the previous study centred around the implementation of a literacy project in higher education, the main ideas shared in this study’s findings can be transferred across disciplines where similar research partnerships are needed.

Design

The literacy research projects used for the study were designed to use partnerships in school settings. The pre-service teachers were assigned placement by professors and instructed to conduct the project in the presence of field work site mentors. This partnership was intending to unite both theory and practice with the pre-service teachers who were learning to teach struggling readers. The field work practicum was intended to host the pre-service teacher candidate and their research project. In addition to the basic project goal to connect pre-service teachers with hosting practicums settings to gain authentic teaching experience, more in-depth project details were expected of the pre-service teachers. The project’s expectations required the pre-service teachers to use deeper cognitive processes. Overall, the goal was to help pre-service learners develop with their critical thinking skills (Adams, 2015). To manage the project, a project rubric was given to the pre-service teachers. The rubric was structured based on the course standards and objectives.

Using a case study approach, the project implementation was observed. The literacy project design required pre-service teachers to do more than simply observe in their assigned field work classroom but to research a literacy related topic and provide select developmentally appropriate, individualized instruction to a student in need for an extended time under the direct supervision of the mentor. The case study approached was used to collect details from these experiences that occurred with the partnerships.

Participants

The participants were pre-service teachers enrolled in a literacy course needed for degree completion and to receive a

teaching license. The pre-service teachers were in the final semesters of their bachelor's degree in elementary education. The pre-service teachers were placed in local schools under the supervisions of partnerships agreeing to be involved in the literacy research. Their experiences were documented by the course professor and then analyzed based on formal and informal observations and conversations held over the semester.

Data Collection

The data was primarily collected using the researcher's journal. The journal was transcribed and coded. This coding was used to develop the themes. These themes were then itemized to plan for a recommendation on the pre-research field work survey.

RESULTS

The findings confirmed there was a disconnection between communication among the university and educators. There were emerging themes identified as challenges that should be addressed. The items are in high importance in order to reach more success with the implementation of the literacy research project and similar projects requiring field work partnerships. These thematic areas include 1) making a careful selection of a site for field work placement, 2) understanding the role of the school culture and the unique challenges when needing to gain permission to access student records, and 3) tackling the overall challenges with managing logistical details. From these findings, members of the research team should create and implement a pre-research survey document used to bridge partnerships.

Theme One: Successful Field Work Site Selection is Needed

More caution should be given when selecting a field work placement for pre-service teachers. A placement that is conducive for the literacy research project to take place at the hosting school site should align with the goals. Placement misalignment with the specific research project goals in place and the field work site's ability to host the research work derailed the entire process. Therefore, the appropriate placement must be a good match. These matching indicators will be unique to the project needs and the researcher's goals.

Theme Two: Understanding the School Culture is Necessary

This finding revealed that school cultures should be acknowledged when selecting a field work placement for pre-service teachers. The unique academic and cultural demographics of the potential school was overlooked and created issues with research goals. Pre-service teachers should be welcomed and receive support with student records and data to build upon.

Theme Three: Tackling Logistical Details Needs Organization

Field work placement data suggests that considering the logistical details needs more organization. Organizing a list of possible teacher mentors available and what grades and subjects they teach is not always considered. Ensuring that a classroom placement is focused on literacy interventions was an issue. In higher grades, more students are active readers whereas lower grades are more often filled with students who are learning to read. This dichotomy makes certain grade level placements unfavourable. When a dyslexia case study was needed, placement was observed by a mentor who did not have a dyslexia student. This was problematic. Changing placements to support the goals became a time constraint.

Most of the time, placements located in more remote geographic locations hindered travel time to and from the university and field work site. Considering the needs to support remote locations was not always balanced with the feasibility of travel. Unnecessary hardships for pre-service teachers were noted.

In conclusion, the three thematic areas included in the findings bring attention to reoccurring challenges that are problematic when attempting to complete research that involves a field work component. These findings can guide the design of a pre-research field work document that addresses the items.

DISCUSSION

There is a benefit to organizing and implementing a pre-research partnership agreement that can unite all parties involved in literacy projects. Educators, course professors, and pre-service teachers can benefit from a shared document that aligns the goals with an appropriate placement. The details of what this document should include emerged in the themes. These items should be considered when creating a pre-research partnership. If this happens, more seamless research can occur.

Furthermore, it was noted that often times reoccurring school partners were frequently invited to work with pre-service teacher placements. Often very little consideration was given to the individual pre-service student needs or the hosting classroom needs. Placement specific issues that made a site not to be the best choice included a lack of diverse experiences, the availability of grade-level mentors, content availability, and ensuring that willing teacher mentors at the field work site location possessed highly qualified credentials that can guide the pre-service teachers without feeling overwhelmed.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that pre-service teachers need diverse classroom experiences to be better prepared to implement culturally responsive needs in a variety of teaching situations. The cultural and demographic data of a school makeup, in relation to the pre-service teacher's previous placement experiences, should be documented over a pre-service teacher's progress in the teacher preparation program to help to ensure pre-service teachers have a diverse experience.

It is not helpful to haphazardly assign a pre-service teacher with a literacy research project to a classroom that has students who are already reading and less likely to need interventions. While this is certainly not always the case, this discussion needs to be included pre-placement to increase success. The findings help understand more about the field work site partnership agreement that is needed. It should consider things such as listing a specific grade level and classroom that would benefit from students getting additional help provided by pre-service teachers. This was often an issue that gets overlooked and with the time constraints, can be the downfall of reaching a research goal. When deciding what to include, asking the following questions can be helpful: *Are there reading groups and interventions with students who have dyslexia in place that the teacher candidate can lead or observe? Is the partnership in a departmentalized classroom that focuses on math and not literacy?* Adding these type of specific question can align research projects with field work sites and avoid confusion. It may be non-conducive to assign a pre-service teacher to a classroom that is departmentalized and only focused on math, when literacy groups are the focus of the research project.

Additional recommendations should be discussed regarding the relationship between the travel distances to work at remote geographic hosting schools, the number highly qualified teachers available for partnerships with pre-service teachers who will be placed under their care was a reoccurring concern and should be considered on the pre-research field work agreement. The number of highly qualified teachers was more difficult to partner with in certain regions due to limited staff. While “the recent advances have made in strengthening teacher certification requirements have begun to be evident in stronger academic backgrounds and licensing test scores for college graduates who have prepared to teach” (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002, p. 23) more work can be done to support geographical areas identified with an increased amount of poverty and with trouble recruiting and retaining highly qualified teacher mentors willing and available to partner with pre-service teacher candidates. If it is not considered and there is a placement of university students with a research related task that will be managed by an unqualified host teacher, there can be an issue for the project’s success. In particular locations where highly qualified teachers are not abundant, it was noted that teachers are more difficult to retain, and students are often highly mobile. These challenging needs are difficult to overcome due to a variety of logistical reasons. Therefore, realizing that these partnership issues can be a problem for literacy project data collection and collaboration (Mollenkopf, 2009) need to be discussed to avoid difficulties with mentorship and research success, supporting both the pre-service teacher and the needs of the field work site may require additional support from highly qualified mentors.

CONCLUSION

Based on a review of the literature and the information learned from this study, a disconnect exists with university professors, pre-service teachers, and hosting field work

educators. It is important to continue to build partnerships between the university, hosting school field work practicum sites, pre-service teacher educators and university professors and avoid challenges like the ones shared in this study. Furthermore, developing and implementing a pre-research agreement can be a tool that can help resolve reoccurring challenges. If the needed changes with the partnerships are acted upon, a better outcome for teacher preparation and the overall educational research process can be achieved. If an outlined presentation of the expectations desired by the university professors as they relate to the hosting schools is shared and discussed, stress may be eliminated. Following the development of a pre-research field work agreement, additional data examining the perceptions of the field work mentor educators hosting the university pre-service teachers as well as the professors involved can then be further studied.

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