

Chapter 99

Differentiated Fieldwork and Practicum Experiences: Matching Teacher Candidate Assignments to Their Skills and Needs

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ABSTRACT

Teacher education programs are charged by administrators, legislative bodies, parents, and others to produce new teachers who are “classroom ready” upon graduation. Many interns and teacher candidates, however, come to their programs with very different levels of preparation and skills in dealing with children. Rather than using a one-size-fits-all approach, teacher educators should differentiate fieldwork and practicum experiences to better meet candidates’ varying readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles to create placements that fit the interns’ needs and skills. Differentiating the fieldwork and practicum experiences of interns has the dual benefit of increasing retention rates of teacher education programs and better preparing new teachers for their first classrooms. Suggestions are made regarding ways teacher educators can differentiate placements for interns and teacher candidates.

INTRODUCTION

After a period when teacher education programs were producing too many graduates for the available jobs, a teacher shortage is looming in many parts of the United States. Concurrent with this shortage are mandates that new teachers be “classroom ready” as they take control of their first classroom (Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton, & Doone, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2013). These conflicting forces pose a conundrum to many teacher preparation programs (Bartow, 2015; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). On the one hand, teacher candidates, their parents, and schools that accept interns want a teacher

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preparation path that is concise, efficient, and organized in such a way that it can be completed in four years with some predictability regarding the work required of each participant. On the other hand, policy makers, parents of school children, and school administrators want new teachers who are fully able to perform the duties expected of them in a competent and proficient manner. A solution to this problem is often considered difficult, as it is challenging to craft a program that competently takes care of both of these concerns.

Happily, ways to assure that teacher education programs are both efficient and effective are readily at hand for most institutions. Growing understanding of differentiated instruction suggests that while embracing common goals and objectives for all learners is equitable and appropriate, mandating the same experiences for all is inefficient and counterproductive (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Tomlinson, 2001; Wolfe, 2001). Some teacher candidates enter their programs with years of time spent as camp counselors, paraprofessionals, or engaged in other experiences working with children. Often these learners proceed quickly and effectively through their fieldwork and practicum experiences, as their prior work has left them effective as classroom managers and knowledgeable about the practices of schools (Campbell & Dunleavy, 2016). Other teacher candidates, however, enter their pathway to becoming a licensed practitioner with few exposures to working with children, and indeed with little if any work experience. These candidates will often require more scaffolding, exposure, and practice before they are ready to take over a classroom on their own (Capraro, Capraro, & Helfeldt, 2010; Washburn-Moses, Noltemeyer, & Schmitz, 2015). This chapter examines how teacher education programs can monitor the skills and needs of their candidates and match these to fieldwork and practicum experiences. Each section concludes with an Implications for Practice section that provide practical suggestions to help teacher education programs to meet the dual needs of efficiency and excellence.

BACKGROUND

Many state departments of education have set a minimum number of hours that all teacher candidates must work before they can receive an initial teaching certificate. All teacher candidates, of course, must complete these experiences before finishing the program (see, e.g., Daniel, 2014; Hawkman, Castro, Bennett, & Barrow, 2015). Other teacher candidates, however, show signs that they may one day become effective classroom teachers but are presently experiencing difficulties with one or more aspects of teaching, be it instructional planning, assessment, classroom management, providing students with feedback, or some other key competency (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). All too often, state agencies and teacher education programs respond to the deficiencies of some by increasing the number of hours required for fieldwork and practicum experiences for *all* teacher candidates (Heejung & Sunghye, 2010; Iverson, Lewis, & Talbot, 2008). This often proves to be ineffective, as some teacher candidates do not need these additional hours, while those who were struggling do not benefit from merely more time (Earley, Imig, & Michelli, 2011; Hughes & McCartney, 2015). Instead of this one-size-fits-all approach, teacher education programs are well served to tailor additional fieldwork and practicum experiences so that they directly address the needs of those candidates who indicate a need for more exposure (McDonald, Kazemi, Kelley-Petersen, Mikolasy, Thompson, Valencia, & Windschitl, 2014; Preseton,

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