Chapter 9
Rewriting Field–Based Literacy Practicum Experiences:
Lessons Learned From a Virtual Literacy Practicum

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ABSTRACT

High-quality, field-based practicum experiences provide learning opportunities foundational to future teachers' pedagogy that coursework alone cannot replicate. However, access to these field-based placements for preservice teachers can be limited at times, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter explores how one instructor of an intermediate literacy course, which carries a 20-hour field-based practicum requirement, rewrote a traditional field-based literacy experience to design a virtual practicum experience. Following a review of the literature, this chapter is divided into three key parts: (1) design elements of a virtual literacy practicum, (2) preservice teacher perceptions of a virtual literacy practicum, and (3) comparisons of preservice teachers' experiences in a traditional in-person literacy practicum to a virtual literacy practicum. Finally, suggestions for re-writing traditional field-based literary practicum experiences will be provided.

INTRODUCTION

In high-quality teacher education programs, field-based experiences have long been considered foundational components (AACTE, 2018). While coursework provides key background knowledge and theoretical frameworks for preservice teachers, field-based practicum experiences offer vital learning opportunities that coursework alone cannot (International Literacy Association & National Council of Teachers of English, 2017; Risko et al., 2008; Sailors et al., 2004). Careful planning of coursework and fieldwork allows preservice teachers to see connections between these two contexts (Darling-Hammond, 2010), each of which informs the other. Field-based experiences are especially powerful when preservice

teachers get to observe and practice pedagogical skills while receiving clinical coaching from mentor teachers and university instructors (AACTE, 2018).

While the research shows that extended time in the field provides preservice teachers with opportunities to meaningfully learn and apply key pedagogical concepts that they will need in their future careers, what to do when the "field" suddenly changes or disappears is less established. This was the unfortunate reality for educator preparation programs in Spring 2020: K-12 school placements halted abruptly as schools closed their doors for in-person learning due to COVID-19, yet preservice teachers were still progressing through educator preparation programs and needing field-based experiences to grow in their pedagogical practice and content knowledge.

This chapter explores how the author, an instructor of an intermediate literacy course with a 20-hour field-based practicum experience with a mentor teacher in a local school, reconceptualized this practicum experience to be offered virtually instead. After a review of existing literature, the chapter will explore (1) design elements of a virtual literacy practicum; (2) the preservice teachers' perceptions of their experiences in the virtual literacy practicum; and (3) preservice teachers' comparisons of their experiences in a traditional in-person field-based literacy practicum and a virtual literacy practicum. Based on these findings, future suggestions for re-writing traditional field-based literary practicum experiences will be provided.

BACKGROUND

High-quality practicum experiences integrate course content with extensive time in field-based placements, with appropriate scaffolding provided by a more expert other (Darling-Hammond, 2010; AACTE, 2018). While this finding is consistent across all educator preparation programs, additional considerations come into play when working with future teachers of literacy. According to research reviewed by the International Literacy Association (ILA) and the National Council of Teachers of English) (NCTE) (2017), four critical indicators of high-quality literacy-focused educator preparation programs include (1) knowledge development, (2) application of knowledge within authentic contexts (including field-based experiences), (3) ongoing teacher development, and (4) ongoing assessments. Risko and Reid (2019) described this second element involving field-based learning as "authentic practice that is extensive, coherent with program content and goals, and well mentored" (p. 424).

Similarly, Sailors et al. (2004) studied field experience components of eight educator preparation programs that the ILA recognized as high-quality. These programs shared three overarching features: (1) building preservice teachers' reflection skills; (2) offering field experiences in varied formats—such as different grades and configurations of instructional groups—and with appropriate scaffolding and feedback; and (3) hosting one-on-one tutoring with struggling readers, either in university reading clinics or in classrooms. Notably, all eight of these ILA-recognized high-quality programs offered preservice teachers opportunities to work with a child in a one-on-one tutoring context, with supervision from a university instructor or classroom teacher. Support can also come from peers in practicum experiences. Allen and Swearingen (2002) worked with preservice and inservice teachers to see how their practicum experience in a university reading clinic impacted their understanding of literacy instruction. One significant structure of this experience involved preservice teachers working in pairs to deliver weekly instruction. In these pairs, one preservice teacher would teach while the other observed through a one-way mirror.

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