
After participating in methods courses combined with field experiences, most students expressed confidence in their readiness for student teaching.

Pre-Student Teachers React to Field-Supplemented Methods Courses¹

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A WIDELY accepted objective of instructors of methods courses for pre-service teachers is to provide as much experience as possible in the schools. The value of early student contact with pupils and teachers in classrooms to test ideas and theories taught in college methods classes has long been established. As phrased by one writer, "It is as irrational to rely on the student teaching period to give education students the true picture as it would be to postpone a medical student's first encounter with surgery until he interns" (Wagoner: 68). Despite its obvious value and increasing reports of its observance, there are limited objective data in the educational literature about the effects of and reactions to early field experience for the education student prior to student teaching.

Abundant evidence supports the notion that preservice, in-service, and graduate students of teaching are helped to develop specific teaching strategies using microteaching techniques (Anderson and Antes). Even a single, brief teaching experience of 15 minutes has been reported as having value in sharpening students' perceptions of themselves as potential teachers and in assisting them in making career decisions (Newlove

and Fuller: 339). Yet one of the few descriptive reports of a structured program of coordinating theory, observation, and participation within the school setting prior to student teaching concludes with only an endorsement of the program and an observation that an empirically tested evaluation must be conducted in the future (Walsh).

This study represents a step toward objective appraisal of students' and cooperating teachers' reactions to one pre-student teaching program of methods courses combined with field experiences.

Description of the Program. Undergraduate elementary majors in the University of Maryland's College of Education take their methods courses in blocked sections taught by teams of curriculum specialists.

The following discussion is a report of the reactions of classes totaling 40 junior

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students, and five methods teachers, who were blocked for reading, language arts, and social studies. Each blocked section met twice a week for a three-hour period. In a typical section during the semester under study, four of the 29 three-hour sessions, or 12 hours, were devoted to elementary school classroom experiences. Eighteen teachers at two elementary schools were involved in the study.

The announced objective of the school-based phase of the methods courses was: "To provide observational and teaching experience for the student in elementary language arts, reading, and social studies; emphasis should not be focused on the refinement of teaching skills, but rather on familiarization with pupil and classroom behaviors." The authors planned to evaluate the blocked methods courses supplemented with field experience by obtaining answers to the following questions which, they felt, were needed to guide future curriculum planning:

1. At the conclusion of the courses, how

confident did the student feel about his ability to apply course content when he would enter student teaching?

2. What were the student's attitudes about the relationship and value of the school field experience to his methods courses?

Several planning meetings were held with the principals, classroom teachers, and college instructors to set up guidelines for the elementary classroom visitations. These guidelines were communicated to the students. Before and during the four subsequent school visits, the methods instructors were available for resource services. While key observations were conducted by the college instructors, no attempt was made to observe each student in all phases of his school participation. Each student had a specific plan of operation including observing the teacher, assisting her, and, finally, presenting a lesson. It was his responsibility to evaluate the extent to which he was successful with this plan.

Each school visit was concluded with a



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feedback seminar to which the principal, students, and college instructors contributed. Students were able to discuss their concerns at this time, or could use personal reaction cards to relay their feelings to the instructors. This feedback was one means of responding to individual problems and needs, adding to the flexibility of the program. The feedback also provided the instructors with ideas and topics for follow-up activities for the on-campus methods courses.

Data Collection. A three-part evaluative form was administered to each student at the conclusion of the field experience. Part A reported how confident the student felt about his ability to apply ideas stressed in the methods course to his forthcoming student teaching experience. Part B measured the extent to which the field experience was perceived as a valuable part of the methods course. Part C offered the student an opportunity to comment fully on any of his reactions to the program.

Summary of Findings. In response to Part A, concerning how confident they felt about their ability to apply ideas or procedures presented in their methods courses combined with field experiences, 65 percent of the students answered "very much so" or "much so." Twenty-eight percent checked "somewhat," and only seven percent showed less confidence or failure to reply.

In addition, when the students were asked how they felt about the value of the field experiences in relation to the methods courses in Part B of the checklist, their attitudes were overwhelmingly positive. Ninety-two percent of these responses were favorable.

A survey of the specific comments (Part C) made by the students reveals in a more explicit manner their positive perceptions of the total experience. They were asked to discuss fully, in writing, the following question:

Considering that you have student teaching ahead of you, how effective do you think the field experience was in helping you to understand, to evaluate, and to apply the ideas discussed in your methods courses?

The answers are summarized in descending frequency of response by the students:

Relationships between theory and practice were observed

Direct experience in applying theoretical ideas about teaching was provided

Student perspective of children and learning was increased

The importance of classroom teachers as resource personnel was recognized

Opportunity was provided to work in an atmosphere free of pressure and external evaluation

Insight and confidence were given about one's potential teaching ability

There were opportunities to observe various techniques useful in controlling a classroom

The experience was a valid introduction to teaching

Opportunities were provided for students to plan and execute lessons on related subjects.

A minority of the students had reservations about the program. Their specific comments offer perceptions which merit consideration as program objectives are appraised:

Preparation for work with children added to the quantity of work required in the course

It was difficult to plan for strange children

Benefits gained were dependent upon the attitude of the cooperating teacher to whom one was assigned

Not enough time was spent in the school

The field experience should be in more than one type of school

Too much time was spent in observation.

The responses show that some students, despite the announced objective of the pre-student teaching field experience, may still have expected an involvement which would be more characteristic of student teaching. There are also implications that student competencies and interests vary even at this level, and that individual differences should be recognized in program planning.

Implications. A significant feature of the program was that it was not one to which

most students reacted with indifference. Feelings were definite—either enthusiastically positive or negative.

A strong mandate in support of the pre-student teaching field experience seems apparent. Feelings of confidence about readiness for student teaching were expressed by the students as a consequence of the combination of theoretical input, direct field experiences, and critical group discussions. Evidence was obtained that schools and the university can mutually plan and execute a satisfying and successful teacher education program combining field and methodological components.

It should be noted that a program of this type adds to the planning time of the college instructor. However, it is the opinion of the authors that the overall effects more than compensate for the extra effort involved. In addition to the avenues which are opened for increasing the cooperative ventures of the public schools and teacher education institutes, an opportunity is afforded to change significantly the role of the college methods instructors and to redesign the nature of their contributions in the field. Traditionally, they have too often operated as supervisors to see that the student teacher does as he has been taught. By shifting the methods instructors' roles from supervisors to resource consultants, interesting possibilities for changes in teacher education are introduced.

For example, in a program such as this, there is an emphasis on student self-learning and self-evaluation. Also, with the classroom teacher a cooperative partner in the enterprise, the college methods instructor has expanded opportunities for creative planning, testing of hypotheses, and contributing to curriculum development and the improvement of learning. Finally, and foremost, educational opportunities are increased for the child who is, in the final analysis, the focus of these efforts.

Recommendations. This descriptive study strongly suggests that elementary school classroom field experiences do add an important dimension to college methods courses. Students express feelings of confi-

dence about their potential functioning in student teaching, and these classroom experiences, when carefully planned, are perceived by them as a valuable part of methods courses.

Because of the positive attitudes which were revealed by this study, it is recommended that field experiences be incorporated into all methods course programs. However, sufficient time must be allowed for in-class discussion and demonstration of methods and materials. A laboratory period, perhaps once a week, to supplement the regular coursework, could involve the students in public schools in a meaningful way. A select few basic strategies might be demonstrated in the school classroom by the teacher, to be practiced and refined by the undergraduate students. A formal in-service program involving the classroom teachers and university personnel could be established to encourage better understanding of techniques, sharing of creative ideas, and discussion of instructional questions. One aspect of this in-service program, then, would be the classroom teachers' demonstrating methods to the undergraduate students and assisting them in practicing their skills.

In the area of research, clearly, more reporting of comparable programs is needed. In further studies, measurement of attitudes of students during their practice teaching and first year teaching experiences would be helpful to assess the long-range effects of the classroom field experience program.

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