

The Value of Experiencing the First Days of School for Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

Quality teacher education programs recognize the importance of field experiences in preparing teacher candidates. A field experience planned during the first days of school is invaluable to the success of a new teacher. The School of Education faculty at The University of Mississippi took on the challenge of implementing a first days of school field experience which proved to be beneficial to the teacher candidates. The information provided in this article explains the steps involved in implementing the plan, as well as the perceptions of the teacher candidates regarding the experience during the preparation program and later during their first year of teaching.

VALUE OF THE FIRST DAYS OF SCHOOL FIELD EXPERIENCE FOR TEACHER EDUCATION CANDIDATES

Field experience is one of the most common “real world” learning experiences implemented in schools of education across the United States (McGlenn, 2003). Teacher education programs recognize the need for candidates to participate in a variety of quality field experiences. Teacher education candidates also understand the importance of field experiences. According to Guyton and McIntyre (1990), they often tend to believe that field experiences provide the only “real” learning in their teacher education programs. Quality field experiences at the beginning of the school year provide candidates with many of the tools they need to be successful and prepare them to start the school year on the positive note their K-12 students deserve (Sommers, 2000).

Probably the most frightening time for beginning teachers is the first day of school. Insuring that teacher education candidates have an opportunity to experience the beginning of school prior to having their own classroom is essential. Wong (2000) contends that the first day of school is the most important day of the school year because what the teacher does can determine success or failure for the entire year. Teacher education candidates and beginning teachers deserve to know how to prepare for this most important time. Teacher candidates often have misconceptions about what they believe is involved in beginning a school year (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). However, first days of school field experiences provide candidates with an opportunity to see how classroom procedures and routines are established and put into motion, how teachers get to know their students and build an understanding of their families and communities, and how prior planning for instruction and procedures enhances classroom

management (LePage, Darling-Hammond, Akar, Gutierrez, Jenkins-Gunn, and Rosebrock, 2005).

Candidates better understand the challenges and necessary problem-solving skills inherent in teaching when they have the opportunity to actually experience the first days of school and build on that knowledge through class discussion later in coursework. In addition, these experiences allow them to make connections between the content learned in coursework and real-life experiences in the classroom (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, and Shulman, 2005). Learning to make these connections increases the probability that the theories, concepts, and skills teacher candidates learn in coursework are remembered and used later as they begin their career (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage, 2005). Ross, Hughes and Hill (2001) acknowledges there are advantages for learning when students are required to connect educational concepts with application observed in school classrooms. They conclude that field experiences, such as the first days of school experience, produce measurable improvement in understanding theory taught in university courses.

It is important for teacher education candidates to recognize that reflection and evaluation are as important as having adequate content knowledge and skills for teaching. In addition, they should learn from their teaching so that it continually improves (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage, 2005). According to Moore (2003), field experiences hold great potential for providing candidates with opportunities to practice decision-making. University instructors advise teacher candidates about the instructional situations they encounter in the classroom, yet through reflection candidates analyze classroom situations and practice effective decision-making skills. Student teaching is

one field experience opportunity in which routine reflection focuses on classroom situations. Moore (2003) contends that teacher education programs need to provide opportunities for teacher candidates, their supervisors, and their mentor teachers to examine and discuss the rationale behind decisions prior to student teaching.

Ingersoll (2003) suggests that understanding the issues beginning teachers face and how university faculty can support them during the initial years of teaching is a proactive measure for maintaining those new to the profession. Teacher education programs realize the need to provide field experience opportunities that include preparing for a new school year. The goal of the teacher preparation program is to provide teacher candidates with the experiences necessary to build the complex schema required to be an effective classroom teacher (Holing, 1998). In order to help future teachers cope with the challenges and diversity of current schools and classrooms, Darling-Hammond (2005) recommends participating in more authentic experiences. Assisting a classroom teacher prior to the first day of school and on the first day of school offers an excellent authentic experience to reduce candidates' anxiety and heighten their awareness that teaching is complex and multifaceted. The challenge facing many teacher education programs is deciding how to implement a field experience during the first days of school since the starting dates for the K-12 school year and the starting dates for the university are different.

A review of the teacher preparation programs across the nation revealed that some universities offer optional first days of school observation field experiences. In these optional programs, teacher education candidates choose to participate in the first days of school observation or elect to substitute another form of field experience. In areas where

the K-12 school year begins after the beginning of the university school calendar, SOE programs place candidates in local Professional Development School (PDS) sites near the university. Faculty at one university in Canada found that placing candidates in PDS sites was a very beneficial field experience for their candidates. Placing candidates in schools on the opening day not only provides their candidates with insight into what it takes to prepare for the first day of school, but also provides the best possible preparation for the candidates' own first day as a newly qualified teacher the following year (Russell, 1999).

After years of discussing the feasibility of implementing a first days of school field experience, the School of Education faculty at The University of Mississippi (UM) took on the challenge of devising a workable plan for implementing a first days of school field experience and were rewarded with very encouraging results. The plan revealed promising effects in better preparing secondary, elementary and special education teacher education candidates for their first teaching job. Unlike the optional field experience offered at other universities, the UM School of Education required all K-12 teacher education candidates entering their senior year to participate in the first days of school field experience. Placing candidates in schools typically used for field experience within the teacher preparation program was not an option because the starting dates for K-12 schools and the university did not coincide. The solution was to allow teacher education candidates to complete this field experience at a public or private K-12 school that they found in the area where they were located during the month of August. Implementing the plan in this manner makes it a unique and flexible alternative that better accommodates the teacher candidates.

Method

The University of Mississippi's School of Education has administered the Teacher Education Program Evaluation (TEPE) to teacher candidates, university supervisors, clinical instructors and administrators in the cooperating schools for over 15 years. As a result of concerns raised on the TEPE and during focus-group interviews held with candidates, the School of Education planned and implemented the first days of school field experience with senior teacher education candidates. A review of the research supported this decision. Candidates' reflective journals, written during the field experience opportunity, were analyzed to determine their perceptions of the benefits of working with and observing an experienced teacher as they prepared for the school year. In addition, a follow-up study was conducted with graduates who participated in the initial first days of school field experience during their first year of teaching to determine the effectiveness of this experience. The research questions that guided the study are listed below.

1. What connections did teacher candidates make between university instruction and the K-12 setting in relation to preparing for a new school year?
2. What were first-year teachers' perceptions as to the value of this experience?
3. What evidence was revealed that assisted in making improvements to the experience?

Research Design

A mixed-method research design was utilized to answer the questions posed in this study. Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods allowed for a more complete understanding of the issue at hand. Qualitative research incorporates participants' own words as they relate their ideas, perceptions, and attitudes about the

phenomenon. Survey research utilizes quantitative methodology that provides an explanation of the phenomenon through numerical data (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006).

Sample

The participants in this study were 244 elementary, secondary, and special education teacher candidates beginning their senior year at the University of Mississippi. The first days of school field experience was required for all teacher education candidates at this stage in their program. Participants consisted of one hundred sixty-one elementary teacher education candidates, sixty-five secondary teacher education candidates, and eighteen special education teacher education candidates.

Procedures

University instructors talked with teacher education candidates about the importance of the first days of school and the benefits they would receive from participating in this “event” during the semester prior to their senior year. Candidates were given a packet of materials that provided specific guidelines of what they were to observe, assist with, and reflect upon. (See guidelines at the end of this article.) Other materials included an informational letter from the Dean of the School of Education and a form to be completed by the school principal where the field experience would take place. In order to make this field experience possible, teacher education candidates were allowed to assist in a K-12 school convenient to them during the opening of the school year, usually during the first weeks of August. It was their responsibility to contact the principal, provide the letter from the Dean, and explain their assignment. The principal was asked to complete the form provided and return it to the School of Education. The

Dean's office then contacted the principal to thank him/her for providing this important opportunity for our student. The teacher education candidates were required to assist one day prior to the first day of school and on the first day of school. Following the field experience, the principal notified the Dean's office verifying that the teacher education candidate completed the field experience requirements.

Candidates turned in their written responses for each item on the observation guideline sheet when they reported for senior orientation at the beginning of the university school year. Guideline criteria included information about the physical environment of the classroom, procedures and routines used on the first day of school, implementation of a classroom management plan, and teacher affect. The reflection component of the guidelines required candidates to explain the rationale for decisions made by the classroom teacher and the implications for impact on student and teacher success. Candidates were also asked to explain how their ideas about the first days of school were influenced during the observation.

Teacher education candidates' written responses to the observation guidelines were utilized in the classroom management course the following semester during student teaching. The candidates' knowledge and understanding of the importance of the first days of school were extended by using their written responses as a supplement to the course content. Their understanding of classroom management was enhanced through group discussions focused on management issues related to their observations during the first days of school experience. In addition, course instructors discovered that some candidates had much richer experiences than others did. Candidates were able to benefit

from one another's experience through the structured discussions facilitated by the instructors.

Data Analysis

In the initial stage of this study, student written responses to items on the observation guideline sheet were coded and categorized to identify themes within the responses. The follow-up portion of the study was completed by asking first year teachers who participated in the first days of school field experience to complete a survey to indicate their perceptions of the value of the experience. A percent was calculated for each response choice for each survey item. For the open-ended item, responses were coded and categorized to reveal themes. Information for improving the first days of school field experience was generated from results of both the qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Results

Analysis of Observation Guideline Written Responses

Valuable information about candidates' conceptualization of preparing for the first day of school was gathered through the analysis of their written responses. This analysis also provided feedback that assisted the School of Education in making changes in the first days of schools field experience that better met the needs of the teacher education candidates. Two themes emerged from the written responses: realizations about preparing for the school year and management on the first day of school.

Theme 1: Realizations about preparing for the school year.

The teacher education candidates assisted with a variety of tasks before the students reported to school. These tasks included putting up bulletin boards, hanging posters, writing names in textbooks, rearranging desks, and copying educational materials. The review of the written responses also indicated that some candidates were not aware of some important aspects of preparing for the first day of school. Special education candidates helped prepare the physical environments of classrooms for students with special needs. In those classrooms, seating arrangements were altered to accommodate students with physical disabilities. A secondary candidate was surprised to discover that by the time she got to her school site, the classroom teacher had already worked for a couple of weeks to prepare the classroom for the first day of school, leaving her little to do. One elementary candidate, who observed in a fourth grade classroom, characterized the day before students arrived as a whirlwind of activity. He admitted being exhausted at the end of the day. These were important aspects of teaching that these students had not considered prior to this experience.

Although most responses indicated our teacher education candidates were impressed with the organization of the physical environments of the classrooms, one candidate noted that the classroom in which she observed remained very messy, even on the first day of school. She realized that this was not how she intended for her classroom to be. Candidates from each program were surprised to discover that some school districts could not equip teachers and students with needed supplies. Yet they pointed out that this too was a good learning experience because future teachers need to be prepared to deal with such shortages.

Teacher education candidates also learned that there is more to the beginning of school than preparing the classroom for students. In addition to duties that helped prepare the classroom, some candidates attended teacher's meetings. One candidate attended a professional development meeting that presented various teaching strategies for teaching writing. Another candidate met with kindergarten teachers to plan lessons for the first two weeks of school. One elementary candidate explained how teachers at her field experience site met to discuss test scores and plan strategies to improve students' test scores. A teacher's meeting, attended by one secondary candidate, called attention to the need for school safety and familiarized teachers with ways to recognize potential gang related problems. To her surprise, the principal introduced the school's police officer. This was certainly a wake-up call.

Theme 2: Realizations about managing a classroom on the first day

On the first day of school, most teacher education candidates expressed amazement at how much the teacher had to 'juggle' in order to take care of everything. Numerous candidates were surprised to learn how many duties teachers were responsible for in addition to teaching. Candidates in all three programs indicated that many classroom teachers provided clear expectations for the students by going over the classroom rules and reading the handbook to the students.

Teacher education candidates expressed uncertainty as to how students would behave and how teachers would react. A candidate observing in a second grade classroom expressed pleasure as she observed her classroom teacher greet each student at the door with a big smile and welcome them into the classroom. One candidate was impressed with how well behaved the students were; while another teacher education candidate was

shocked to see a child spanked on the first day of school. Experiences like these validated the need for an effective classroom management plan, a topic covered in several of their teacher education courses.

Numerous teacher education candidates indicated that the first day of school was hectic. One candidate even described it as the most organized chaos he had ever experienced. However, even with the chaos, almost every candidate agreed that the experience had been beneficial. A secondary candidate stated that this chaos revealed another dimension. She pointed out that in previous observation experiences, schools were well into their school year and functioned like well-oiled machines. Witnessing this disorderly aspect revealed a surprising side she never knew existed. One special education candidate said that she found it encouraging that the first days of school can be exciting and fun when the teacher is prepared. This field experience seemed to diminish fears of the first day of school.

The narratives yielded interesting information concerning how teachers spent their time prior to and on the first day of school. Many of the teacher education candidates were surprised by the amount of work required to effectively plan lessons and activities for the beginning days of a new school year. Most candidates felt the observation was beneficial to them because they were able to see what happened behind the scenes as teachers prepared for the first day of school. Some candidates admitted they were intimidated at first, while others stated they were skeptical of the value of the experience. However, after observing these initial days of school, most of the candidates were grateful to have had this experience and felt more confident to plan for the beginning of the year.

Follow-up Survey Results

Teacher education candidates who participated in the initial first days of school field experience were contacted during the fall of their first year of teaching. A follow-up survey, which consisted of ten likert-type items and one open-ended question, was sent electronically to these graduates. The intent of the survey was to determine the benefits of the experience to the new teachers and to assist university faculty in strengthening the experience for future teacher education candidates. Responses to the items on the follow-up survey ranged from Strongly Agree, Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, Disagree, to Strongly Disagree. Results of the survey are included on Table 1:

Table 1

First Year Teacher Responses to Follow-up Survey

The First Days of School Observation:	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. provided me with an opportunity to assist a classroom teacher in preparing a classroom for the beginning of the school year.	54.5%	27.3%	9.1%	-	-	9.1%
2. provided me with an opportunity to assist in a classroom the first day students reported to school.	63.6%	18.2%	9.1%	-	-	9.1%
3. was beneficial to my preparation as a classroom teacher.	63.6%	9.1%	9.1%	9.1%	-	9.1%
4. helped prepare me for my first day of school as a classroom teacher.	54.5%	27.3%	9.1%	9.1%	-	-
5. reduced my anxiety about the first day of school.	-	36.4%	27.3%	18.2%	9.1%	9.1%

6. helped me organize my classroom for the first day of school.	-	27.3%	18.2%	18.2%	9.1%	27.3%
7. helped me organize materials for the first day of school.	-	36.4%	36.4%	9.1%	9.1%	9.1%
8. provided me with effective procedural techniques to implement on the first day of school.	36.4%	27.3%	18.2%	9.1%	-	9.1%
9. enhanced my content knowledge during class discussions in the classroom management class.	18.2%	27.3%	36.4%	9.1%	-	9.1%
10. should be continued as a required field experience component in the teacher education program.	18.2%	27.3%	36.4%	-	9.1%	9.1%

Note. Cells that contain a - indicate that no response was made for that rating category.

Although the return rate was low (41%), the survey revealed some interesting results.

- Overall, respondents were positive about the experience and the majority strongly agreed or agreed that it was beneficial in their preparation of becoming a classroom teacher and in preparing them for the first day of school. The majority also strongly agreed or agreed that the experience provided ideas on procedural techniques to use on the first day of school.
- The respondents were not as positive, however, that the experience reduced their anxiety about the first day of school or that the experience helped them organize their own classrooms or materials for the first day of school.
- When asked whether the experience strengthened their understanding of the connections between course content and the classroom and whether this experience should continue to be required, only 18.2% of respondents disagreed.

To better prepare teacher education candidates for the first days of school, results of the follow-up survey indicated three areas that should receive focus in our teacher education program. The areas were related to reducing anxiety about the first day of school, and providing more guidance on organizing the classroom and instructional materials for the first day of school. Teacher education candidates and first-year teachers provided suggestions for improvement on the teacher candidate narratives and on the follow-up survey that would strengthen these areas. These suggestions, described below, are being taken into consideration while planning for future first day of school experiences.

Teacher candidates felt the experience should last longer than two days; one response indicated that it would be beneficial to remain in the classroom the entire first week of school. Other candidates responded that it would be beneficial to meet with the teachers several times throughout the summer as they prepared their classroom and considered lesson plans. The days prior to school starting are hectic for teachers and the candidates did not feel they had adequate time to talk with the teachers and ask questions related to their experience.

After experiencing the first days of school as teachers in their own classrooms, first-year teachers indicated they realized much more was involved in starting a new school year. They suggested that spending more than two days in a K-12 school setting would be beneficial to future teacher education candidates. The extra time in the classroom at the beginning of the school year would allow more dialogue with veteran teachers and would involve them in a wider range of beginning of the year experiences. Feedback from principals and classroom teachers was also positive. They indicated the

extra help at this hectic time of year has been very beneficial to the classroom teacher and students.

Conclusion

As LePage, et. al. (2005) indicated the opportunity to participate in preparation for the first day of school is an invaluable experience for teacher education candidates. Being a part of this allows them to acquire knowledge about procedures and routines that should be in place; about planning for instruction and classroom management; and learning about the community, the students, and their families. Findings from the study conducted at The University of Mississippi support these ideas and indicate the need for the program to add more time to the first days of school experience to address teacher candidate concerns related to anxiety and preparation for the beginning of school. The results also provide information about the transfer of learning teacher candidates made between the university course content and the K-12 classroom that later became useful in their first year of teaching. Allowing teacher candidates to observe and assist in-service teachers as they prepare for the beginning of the school year heightened candidates' awareness of what was involved. Providing a predetermined list of items on which candidates focus during the experience and use as they reflected on the time spent in the classroom proved very beneficial to their understanding of the importance of establishing a positive K-12 environment. As a follow-up activity, these candidates were surveyed during their first year of teaching to determine the value of the first days of school field experience and to provide suggestions of ways the experience may be improved. Improvements to the field experience for future teacher education candidates were based on the reflections and the suggestions for improvement provided by the participants.

The initial first days of school field experience plan used at The University of Mississippi shows promise for programs searching for a plan that will allow their teacher education candidates to spend time in the K-12 setting at the beginning of the school year. However, each teacher preparation program must consider their own circumstances when developing a plan to meet the needs of the future teachers in their education preparation programs. If scheduling a field experience for teacher candidates during the first days of school is not possible because of time constraints, the use of video clips, interactive videos, or other electronic means could be an alternative. This opportunity will be beneficial to teacher candidates however it is structured.

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First Days of School Observation Guidelines

Teacher Education Candidate: _____ Grade: _____
Program: Elementary _____ Secondary _____ Special Education _____
District _____ School: _____
Principal _____ Classroom Teacher _____

Part 1: Respond to the following in narrative form based on your first of the school year two-day observations.

- What preparations were made by the classroom teacher prior to the students' first day?
- How did students enter the class, and how/where were they seated?
- Describe the room environment (e.g., posters, bulletin boards, teacher table, etc.)
- What was the desk/table arrangement? Provide a brief description and attach a detailed diagram.
- Were there posted/written objectives or daily agenda? If so, describe:
- Were there posted classroom/school rules? If so, describe. If not, how were the students informed of the rules?
- How were textbooks and other materials they distributed?
- What was the routine for dismissal (bell or other)?
- Describe the teacher's effect (e.g., tone, smiling, friendly, strict, humorous, etc.)

Part 2: Reflection of Observation Experience

- What procedure and routines did the teacher introduce on the first day that will clearly be used all year long?
- What did the students learn on their first day of class about behavior expectations from the teacher? What did the teacher do (both implicitly and explicitly) to teach the students about his/her behavior expectations?
- What did you find surprising or unexpected about your observations? How have your ideas about the first days of school been influenced by this observation?
- **Teacher education candidates will turn in the completed computer generated narrative at the beginning of the next school year at the senior orientation.**