
School–University Partnerships in Special Education Field Experiences

A National Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

A national survey was conducted in which universities and colleges that provided special education teacher preparation programs described and evaluated their relationships with schools in terms of field experiences for preservice teachers. Surveys were mailed to randomly selected institutions of higher education (IHEs) that provided special education teacher preparation programs. Nearly three fourths (72.2%) of the IHEs reported having formal written partnerships with districts, schools, or teachers; however, such formal partnerships only partially influenced the identification and placement of preservice teachers in special education field experiences. Some IHEs used either university supervisors or cooperating/mentor teachers only, but not both, when evaluating the students' performance in field experiences. This phenomenon occurred, however, only in pre-student teaching field experiences. Less than half (41.4%) of the IHEs allowed teacher candidates to complete the student teaching requirement while employed as teachers. We summarize the reported elements of the formal and informal partnerships as well as the conditions under which on-the-job fieldwork was permitted.

STUDENT TEACHING HAS TRADITIONALLY BEEN the culminating activity of teacher preparation programs. Historically, student teaching was often a student's first and only experience of working in an actual classroom setting. Teacher education professionals began to recognize that a single field experience in the form of student teaching was not sufficient to prepare teachers for their own classrooms. Many teacher preparation programs, therefore, extended the

amount of time that teacher candidates spent in field-based classroom experiences. These field experiences enabled preservice teachers to interact with and observe practicing teachers and students before the formal student teaching phase of their preparation.

The extended field experiences afforded additional opportunities for university students to raise questions, to conduct inquiries into teaching and learning, and to experiment with various management and instructional strategies. These experiences also allowed prospective teachers to apply and analyze newly acquired skills and competencies, to identify discrepancies with their existing knowledge, and to suggest alternative ways to use and test new understandings in real-world situations (Sileo, Prater, Luckner, Rhine, & Rude, 1998).

Within the last 15 to 20 years, teacher educators have placed additional emphasis on the need for quality fieldwork experiences for individuals preparing to be teachers. Most of this emphasis has focused on school–university partnerships. The current national and professional catalysts for school–university partnerships are the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) and the Holmes Partnership (formerly known as the Holmes Group). The NNER was established with the goal of effecting the “belief that the empowerment of schooling and the renewal of education must occur simultaneously” (Clark, 1999a, p. xix). Those adopting the NNER philosophy deliver teacher education in collaboration with *partner schools*, in which university and public school faculty members work toward the simultaneous preparation of teachers and school renewal. The Holmes Partnership

is concerned with strengthening the links between universities and schools as well as the connections between colleges of education and other university units, particularly colleges of arts and sciences. The Holmes Partnership advances a reform agenda for the education of school professionals to improve teaching and learning for all students.

The creation of the NNER and the Holmes Partnership and their promotion and focus on partner schools or professional development schools (PDSs) has influenced the preparation of teacher candidates. The terms *partner schools* and *professional development schools* will be used synonymously throughout this article. Partner schools ground teacher education in school practice and help university students to integrate inquiry, instructional theory, and practical classroom applications. They also foster shared responsibility for enhancing the quality of teacher preparation; collaborative curricular and instructional design, implementation, and evaluation; and students' reflection regarding professional knowledge, abilities, and values. Formal school-university partnerships offer opportunities for preservice teachers to become acquainted with the complexity of teaching and to learn actively and simultaneously about all components of teaching—pedagogical and subject-area content, students, and school cultures (Cochran, DeRuiter, & King, 1993).

We have found few discussions regarding students with disabilities or special education in the school-university partnerships professional literature. In a review of nine books supporting the NNER or the Holmes Partnership (Clark, 1999a; Goodlad, 1984, 1990, 1994; Goodlad & McMannon, 1997; Johnston, Brosnan, Cramer, & Dove, 2000; Norlander-Case, Reagan, & Case, 1999; Patterson, Michelli, & Pacheco, 1999; Smith & Fenstermacher, 1999), only two references were located regarding special education. Both described specific school-university partnerships in which general and special education teacher preparation were somewhat integrated (Johnston et al., 2000; Norlander-Case et al., 1999).

In a review of periodicals, we also found relatively few references to special education in the context of school-university partnerships. Using the UnCover, ERIC, and PsychAbstract computer databases, we located only 10 articles addressing school-university partnerships specific to special education, two of which were general discussion articles. One article advocated collaboration among universities, schools, and general and special education to best prepare both general and special education teachers (Quigney, 1998). Another article questioned why the Holmes Partnership ignored special education (Sapon-Shevin, 1990). The remaining articles described specific school-university partnership programs at the University of South Florida (Christensen et al., 1996; Cranston-Gingras, Raines, Paul, Epanchin, & Rosselli, 1996; Rosselli, Perez, Piersall, & Pantridge, 1993), Johns Hopkins University (King-Sears, 1995; King-Sears, Rosenberg, Ray, & Fagan, 1992), Northern Arizona University (Minner, Varner, & Prater, 1995), the University of Utah (Welch & Sheridan, 1993), and the University of Wisconsin

at Milwaukee (Wesson, Voltz, & Ridley, 1994). Much of the discussion in these articles focused on collaborative partnerships not only between universities and schools but between those engaged in general and special education teacher preparation. In fact, in some cases, little discussion was directed specifically toward special education teacher preparation.

Given the current emphasis on PDSs and other university-school partnerships throughout general education, the paucity of research and professional literature dealing with special education is surprising. Sapon-Shevin (1990) provided potential explanations why special education is not typically included in these discussions. First, "current economic and political variables have minimized society's willingness to attend to the educational needs of all children" (p. 57). Second, special education is perceived as significantly distinct from general education; and third, special education is included and addressed, but more broadly, for example, in the context of at-risk children and youth.

Given the increased focus on field experience for teacher candidates, particularly in school-university partnerships, coupled with the limited amount of research and discussion specific to special education, we were interested in examining current relationships between public schools and institutions of higher education (IHEs) as they relate to preparing future special educators. In particular, we were interested in

1. the degree of formality of school-university partnerships for field experiences,
2. the impact of partnerships on identifying field settings and placing students in those settings,
3. the roles and responsibilities of mentor/cooperating teachers and university supervisors, and
4. field experience expectations and evaluation procedures.

METHOD

Questionnaire

A questionnaire consisting of 20 questions was designed. The questions focused on partnerships and field placements, cooperating/mentor teachers, fieldwork requirements, supervisors, evaluation procedures, IHE characteristics, and general comments. Several teacher educators examined drafts of the questionnaire, and based on their feedback, modifications were made to clarify the questions and facilitate the ease of completion. Some of the questions presented multiple choices, with the option to also write in other answers (e.g., "How are field placements identified? Check all that apply"). Other questions required open-ended responses (e.g., "Generally, how many visits or observations are made for fieldwork during a term or semester prior to student teach-

ing?"). A brief note of introduction preceded the questions and requested that "a faculty or staff member knowledgeable about field experiences in special education" complete the questionnaire.

Procedure

Every third institution of higher education that granted a baccalaureate or master's degree in special education listed in the *National Directory of Special Education Personnel Preparation Programs* (Council for Exceptional Children, 1991) was selected for inclusion in this study. The IHEs were listed in alphabetical order by state.

The questionnaire and a self-addressed stamped envelope were mailed to the address provided in the directory. In all, 226 questionnaires were mailed. Nine were returned either as undeliverable or with a note that indicated that the IHE no longer offered a program in special education. Therefore, a total of 217 questionnaires were presumed delivered to IHEs that had a special education program. Approximately 4 weeks following the original mailing, nonrespondents were sent a second questionnaire, again with an accompanying self-addressed stamped envelope. An additional note was attached encouraging the respondents to complete and return the questionnaire.

Sixty-four questionnaires were returned with the first mailing. An additional 51 questionnaires were received following the second mailing. The 115 returned questionnaires represented a 53.0% return rate.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed across two dimensions. First, quantitative data were coded, and percentages, means, medians, modes, ranges, and standard deviations were computed. Second, open-ended questions and solicited and unsolicited comments were read and synthesized into categories.

RESULTS

Sample IHE Characteristics

The national directory from which the IHEs were selected randomly (Council for Exceptional Children, 1991) listed IHEs by state. All 50 states plus Puerto Rico were represented in the randomly selected sample. Usable questionnaires were returned from 43 states and Puerto Rico. No responses were received from Colorado, Delaware, New Hampshire, North Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Vermont.

Respondents were asked to identify the type of program for which the questionnaire was completed. More than half of those responding to this question ($n = 110$) indicated that they had completed the questionnaire as it related to a baccalaureate program only ($n = 58$; 57.2%). Other responses

included postbaccalaureate only (e.g., 5th-year program; $n = 5$; 4.5%) and graduate program only ($n = 9$; 8.2%). Thirty-eight (34.5%) of the IHEs offered more than one program, most of which were postbaccalaureate and master's programs ($n = 18$; 16.4%), followed by baccalaureate and master's programs ($n = 8$; 7.3%). Six (5.5%) IHEs offered baccalaureate and postbaccalaureate programs, and 6 (5.5%) additional IHEs offered baccalaureate, postbaccalaureate, and master's programs.

Of the 115 respondents, 109 answered the question regarding program accreditation and approval. Most respondents indicated that their programs were accredited or approved by more than one organization. The most frequently identified accreditation/approval body, whether identified as the only organization or in combination with others, was the state department of education (DOE; $n = 91$; 83.5%). The next most frequently identified was the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE; $n = 74$; 67.9%), followed by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC; $n = 50$; 48.8%). When examined by combined accrediting/approving organizations, nine respondents (8.3%) indicated that both NCATE and CEC accredited or approved their programs. Other combinations included NCATE and the state DOE ($n = 25$; 22.9%); CEC and the state DOE ($n = 9$; 8.3%); and NCATE, CEC, and the state DOE ($n = 32$; 29.3%). Other accrediting/approving agencies included regional accreditation organizations (e.g., Western Association of Schools and Colleges) or specific state agencies (e.g., the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing).

Respondents were asked to indicate if their IHE belonged to the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER) or the Holmes Partnership. They were given the options of *currently a member*, *has been but is no longer a member*, or *don't know*. Only seven participants (6.1%) stated that their IHE was a member of the Holmes Partnership, and five (4.3%) indicated that they belonged to the NNER. Six (5.3%) additional IHEs had been members of the Holmes Partnership but did not have current membership. None of the IHEs was a member of both the NNER and the Holmes Partnership. Approximately one third of the respondents ($n = 39$; 33.9%) indicated that they did not know if their IHE belonged to the NNER, and about one fourth ($n = 28$; 24.3%) did not know the status of their IHE related to the Holmes Partnership. Nearly two thirds did not respond to this item (NNER, $n = 71$, 61.7%; Holmes, $n = 73$, 63.5%).

Partnerships and Relationships

Respondents were asked to identify the partnership and the relationship between the IHE and the local schools in terms of the field placements of special education preservice teachers. The following information prefaced this section:

Some universities enter into formal written partnership agreements with local schools and/or

districts. Other relationships are more informal. For example, the principal of a school may be contacted and agree verbally to “partner” with the university for special education field placements. In other universities, individual teachers are contacted and asked to participate as cooperating or mentor teachers.

Participants were asked to identify if their IHE entered into formal written partnerships or informal relationships with districts, schools, or individual teachers.

Nearly three fourths ($n = 83$; 72.2%) of the respondents indicated that they had formal written partnerships with teachers, schools, or districts to place their preservice students in classrooms for special education field experience. Of the IHEs with formal partnerships, most identified the partnership at the district level only ($n = 57$; 49.6%). Other levels at which formal partnerships existed are detailed in Table 1. Seventy-five (65.2%) of the respondents indicated that an informal relationship existed between the IHE and the local schools with respect to special education field experience placements. Most informal partnerships were identified at all levels, with the district, the school, and individual teachers ($n = 19$; 16.5%). Other levels of informal relationships are detailed in Table 1. Most of the IHEs had both formal and informal relationships with districts, schools, or teachers ($n = 81$; 70.0%).

Several of the participants listed the components of the formal partnership. Responses included items such as the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and partners, outcomes and timelines for the students while at the schools, attendance parameters, evaluation procedures, and the qualifications of cooperating/mentor teachers.

TABLE 1. Formal Partnerships and Informal Relationships Between Institutions of Higher Education and Local School Systems by Partnership Level

Partnership level	Formal		Informal	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
District only	57	49.6	17	14.8
School only	13	11.3	9	7.8
Teacher only	3	2.6	15	13.0
District and school	5	4.3	8	7.0
School and teacher	1	0.9	5	4.3
District and teacher	0		2	1.7
District, school, and teacher	4	3.5	19	16.5

Note. $N = 115$.

Field Experience Identification and Assignment

Respondents were asked to identify how special education field placements were determined and who placed students in or assigned students to their field experience. The following choices were provided:

1. a separate unit, such as a field services division;
2. a staff or faculty member in the unit responsible for special education preparation;
3. the individual(s) responsible for supervising field experiences; or
4. the formal partnership agreement between the IHE and the schools.

Of the respondents who stated that they had formal partnerships ($n = 82$), only three (3.6%) used the formal partnership agreements alone in identifying special education field placements. Another 25 (30.1%) used the formal partnerships along with IHE faculty and staff to identify field placements. Approximately two thirds ($n = 54$; 65.9%) did not identify the formal partnership agreement as playing a role. Instead, these IHEs used special education faculty or staff, faculty or staff in a separate unit (e.g., field services), field supervisors, or some other means to identify field placements. Other approaches to identifying field placements included student–faculty collaboration and professional interactions with district special education directors who identified potential mentor teachers. A number of respondents indicated that preservice teachers were employed in special education teaching positions (i.e., on-the-job field placements) that included special education emergency credentials and licensure, certification waivers, or both.

The existence of formal partnerships was identified least often as influencing the assignment of students to special education field experiences. Only three (3.6%) IHEs with formal partnerships indicated that the formal partnerships alone determined field assignments for university preservice special educators. Seventeen (20.7%) respondents indicated that both the formal partnership agreement and the IHE faculty and staff determined field placements. In 58 IHEs (70.7%), special education faculty and staff, faculty and staff in a separate unit, field supervisors, or a combination of the three determined assignments without the formal partnership influencing this decision. Four (4.9%) respondents indicated using other means for assigning field placements, which included special education curriculum committee recommendations to a field services office as well as faculty members’ and mentor teachers’ recommendations and approval of assignments. Again, in some cases, assignments were based on preservice teachers’ employment in special education teaching positions. In fact, in a separate question, the respondents were asked whether students could complete the *student teaching*

requirement while employed. Of the 111 respondents who answered this question, 46 (41.4%) responded *yes*.

Field Supervision

Questions were asked regarding the number of contact hours required (i.e., the number of hours that students spent in schools) and the number of supervisory visits or observations both for pre-student teaching field experiences and during student teaching. Although the respondents were asked to provide the average number of visits, several listed ranges. In those cases, an average was computed for the range provided (e.g., “2–3 visits” became “2.5 visits”) for data analysis purposes.

Means, standard deviations, medians, modes, and ranges for the number of contact hours required and the number of supervisory visits and observations made on field experiences before and during student teaching are listed in Table 2. The range of contact hours required varied widely both prior to (0–533 hours) and during student teaching (30–2,800 hours). On average, almost twice as many supervisory visits and observations were made during student teaching as were made before student teaching.

Seven respondents did not report any supervisory visits or observations during the pre-student teaching period; these were investigated in more detail. Two respondents indicated that pre-student teaching fieldwork was not supervised at all. Two other respondents stated that cooperating/mentor teachers took responsibility for supervision at the pre-student teaching level. The remaining three respondents did not explain the lack of supervisory visits or observations.

Evaluation of Fieldwork

School–university partnerships imply that both the university supervisors and the cooperating/mentor teachers are involved in providing feedback for and evaluating students’ preservice fieldwork experiences. Few ($n = 5$; 4.7%) survey respondents indicated that university supervisor observations were used exclusively to evaluate special education fieldwork experiences that preceded student teaching. More likely, the

cooperating/mentor teacher’s feedback was used to the exclusion of the university supervisor ($n = 20$; 18.9%). However, the majority of respondents indicated that both the university supervisor’s and the cooperating/mentor teacher’s feedback were used to evaluate the student ($n = 77$; 72.6%). Four (3.8%) respondents stated that neither university supervisor observations nor cooperating/mentor teacher feedback was used to evaluate pre-student teaching fieldwork. On further examination, we discovered that one of the four used an “evaluation/assessment form,” without explanation of who completed the form. The other three used seminar participation and portfolios, portfolios only, or interviews to evaluate fieldwork performance prior to student teaching.

Most respondents indicated that during student teaching, both the university supervisor and the cooperating/mentor teacher evaluated the student ($n = 111$; 99.1%). In fact, none of the respondents stated that the university supervisor or the cooperating/mentor teacher evaluated the student alone, to the exclusion of the other. One respondent indicated that a “competency checklist” was used for evaluation, but the respondent failed to state who completed this checklist.

In addition to university supervisor observations and cooperating teacher feedback, respondents were asked to identify other evaluation tools used prior to student teaching. They were given the following choices:

1. accompanying seminars ($n = 66$; 62.3%),
2. portfolios ($n = 70$; 66.0%), and
3. other tools (specified by the respondent; $n = 23$; 21.7%).

Most IHEs used university supervisors’ observations, cooperating/mentor teacher feedback, seminars, and portfolios ($n = 33$; 31.1%). The next most frequent combination was university supervisors’ observations, cooperating/mentor teacher feedback, and portfolios ($n = 13$; 12.3%), followed by all four plus at least one additional requirement ($n = 9$; 8.5%). Other evaluation tools included students’ written reflections and journal entries, videotaped demonstrations of teaching skills and competencies, work samples, and competency checklists and performance on standardized tests.

TABLE 2. Required Field Experience and Supervision Prior to and During Student Teaching

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mdn</i>	Mode	Range
Pre-student teaching					
Contact hours required ^a	163.4	103.6	150	150	0–533
Supervisory visits/observations ^b	3.5	2.9	3	2	0–15
Student teaching					
Contact hours required ^a	456.7	376.2	360	300	30–2,800
Supervisory visits/observations ^a	6.5	4.0	2	4	2.5–30

^a $n = 91$. ^b $n = 79$.

During student teaching, IHEs used portfolios ($n = 95$; 84.8%), accompanying seminars ($n = 86$; 76.8%), and other tools ($n = 26$, 23.2%) to evaluate student teaching performance. The greatest number of respondents indicated that they used university supervisors' observations, cooperating/mentor teacher feedback, seminars, and portfolios ($n = 53$; 47.3%), followed by the same four plus at least one additional requirement ($n = 20$; 17.9%). Other evaluation tools used during student teaching included competency checklists, written case studies about specific children with disabilities, action research, and presentations in collaboration with cooperating teachers.

Elements of Formal and Informal Partnerships

Respondents were asked to briefly describe the elements of their formal and informal partnerships. Similar comments were synthesized into the following categories:

- *IHEs entered into formal partnerships more frequently when dealing with student teaching field requirements.* The results indicated that student teaching was viewed as an important element of the preparation program that necessitated formal partnerships between the IHEs and public schools to provide appropriate field experiences. Typical comments included, "For student teaching, we have formal partnerships," or, "All student teaching placements are formal under partnership." Some respondents indicated that their IHEs had written contracts with districts, schools, or teachers only when dealing with student teaching. In a few instances, the state reportedly provided the framework for formalizing student teaching partnerships. For example, one individual wrote, "The state has formal procedures [that] all universities follow to arrange student teaching placements."
- *Conversely, IHEs tended to use informal procedures for pre-student teaching experiences.* Unlike student teaching, where the partnerships were defined more formally, the pre-student teaching experiences were conducted more informally. Many respondents made comments such as, "Informal partnerships exist for pre-clinical/pre-student teaching experiences," or, "Fieldwork prior to student teaching is arranged informally." There seemed to be less concern about the need to formalize pre-student teaching field experiences.
- *The formality of the partnership between IHEs and schools varied greatly.* Some IHEs

entered into partnerships with legal documents, which in some cases could be characterized as contracts between the IHE and the school system. For example, one respondent described the formal partnership as "a legal document signed by the dean and superintendent outlining legal issues, etc." Other respondents characterized the elements of their formal partnerships with other forms of signed documents, such as "statements in student teachers' handout that teachers sign." Still other formal partnerships were described by respondents as including less legal or formal paperwork, such as letters sent to the school's principal explaining the requirements of the practicum.

- *The parties responsible for establishing and maintaining the formal partnerships also varied.* IHE responsibility for the partnership with local schools varied across a wide range of individuals, from the dean of the college of education to a college of education "committee." In some cases, particular units were identified, such as the Office of Field Experiences. What is interesting is that a few respondents identified entities outside the IHE as responsible for the formal partnership, such as the state DOE, the city, and other colleges/universities. One respondent indicated that the formal partnership with schools and districts was based on those "with whom we have written grants to fund partnerships."
- *A variety of informal strategies were used to identify field experiences and assign students to placements.* Several respondents indicated informal contacts with teachers and principals to arrange field experiences. For example, one respondent wrote, "If we have worked with a teacher previously, the teacher is approached directly. If it is a new school or teacher, the principal is approached." Another participant commented, "In many field-based experiences, we simply contact the teacher directly to arrange for general observations." Another respondent indicated that the field supervisors developed mutual agreements to host either a student or a cohort of students at a particular school and that "some principals/teachers have dedicated their school to hosting a cohort of teachers in training." Usually, the IHEs took the responsibility for locating field experiences. In a few cases, the students were allowed to select their own field placement. One individual wrote, "Field expe-

riences are attached to every one of our methods courses. Students choose which schools they would like to visit for each 20-hour practicum. I contact the school for the student to arrange each placement (in writing and by phone).”

- *A few partnerships involved not only schools and IHEs, but also partnerships between general and special education.* Although our review of the literature resulted in a limited discussion of special education within the school–university partnership movement, a few IHEs appeared to involve both general and special education in these efforts. One participant identified combined field experiences for general and special education as the “most formal” field experiences offered by the school–university partnership. Another respondent stated that the IHE had partnership agreements “with 42 of 49 school districts for both general education and special education,” thereby implying the inclusion of special–university education in the development and maintenance of school–university partnerships.
- *Other IHEs distinguished between general and special education partnerships with schools.* More respondents indicated that special education partnerships were not included in general education partnerships than indicated that partnerships included both general and special education. For example, one respondent stated that the IHE entered into formal partnerships but the “formal partnership does not specifically deal with special education.” Another individual wrote, “Although our school of education has formal agreements, the special education program tends to work more informally with districts, schools, and teachers.” Another respondent commented, “Although we have formal partnerships with satellite schools, [there are] not enough special education placements. [Special education has] informal agreements with a network of mentor teachers.” Comments regarding the exclusion of special education from general education partnerships were more frequent than comments on the inclusion of special education in school–university partnerships.
- *The collaborative nature of the partnership varied.* The manner in which the IHE and schools partnered to provide appropriate field

experience for teacher candidates took several forms. In most cases, the IHE was responsible for identifying the schools and inviting them to participate in a partnership. In a few cases, there was more collaboration between the parties. For example, one individual stated that the university trained and paid the mentor teachers, but that they were “collaboratively selected.” More typically, the IHE selected the field placements and then sought approval from the schools (e.g., “Special education suggests student teaching placements student by student to districts. District has final approval.”).

- *A few IHEs identified professional development schools (PDSs) as their form of formal partnerships.* Four respondents identified formal partnerships with PDSs for special education field experiences. For example, one participant described three professional development schools used by both general and special education. Each PDS had a field experience coordinator who served as liaison with the IHE.

Internships

As stated earlier, 41.4% of the respondents indicated that teacher candidates could complete the student teaching requirement while being employed as teachers. The conditions under which such on-the-job fieldwork, often referred to as *internship*, were approved included the following:

- *Internships were allowed for graduate or 5th-year students only.* Many respondents indicated that internships were possible only for teacher candidates who had already earned a bachelor’s degree, although the degree might have been in any field of study. Comments included responses such as, “Graduates are able to do a year-long staff development internship, which we supervise.” A few respondents commented that the teacher candidate needed some type of teaching license (e.g., elementary education) in order to be employed as a special educator and complete an internship in lieu of the traditional student teaching.
- *Internships were allowed in shortage areas where the school district had granted a waiver or a provisional/emergency license/certificate.* Several respondents commented on the need to allow internships because of a general teacher shortage in

special education (e.g., “Due to the severe teacher shortage in special education, teachers can demonstrate competence in their own classrooms”) or because of a need in specific disability areas (e.g., “Some school systems who are desperate for EBD teachers will hire in this setup”).

- *Interns were required to demonstrate the same competencies as traditional student teachers.* Several respondents emphasized the importance of interns completing the same requirements as student teachers. “Their responsibilities remain the same as all other student teachers.”
- *IHEs made accommodations for student interns.* Many respondents indicated that the intensity and duration of the field experience were greater for interns than for traditional student teachers. In most cases, the IHE required teacher candidates to extend the amount of time supervised. For example, one respondent wrote, “The intern must spread 9 credits over 3 semesters instead of 2.” A few IHEs made unique accommodations. For example, one individual wrote that “almost all of our students (we have a graduate level program) are employed. They have the option of 2–3 weeks placements—1 each in an elementary and secondary placement—and the 6–8 weeks in [their] own classroom with intense supervision.”
- *In some instances, schools were asked to take more responsibility to ensure that internships were possible.* Not only did the IHEs make accommodations to allow for student teaching on the job, but the schools also demonstrated flexible employment policies to make this possible. One respondent, for example, indicated that internships were not preferred but were allowed under the following conditions: “The school of employment must make alternative arrangements so that the student meets all requirements of the practicum.” This respondent did not elaborate on what these “alternative arrangements” might involve. Another individual wrote, “We have a dual endorsement program [that] allows inservice teachers to add a special education endorsement while teaching. District arranges a ‘job swap’ in order to fulfill practicum.” Again, the details of *job swapping* were not clear. Nonetheless, it was

apparent that some schools were flexible and accommodated teacher candidates in completing internships.

- *Some states dictated by law whether and under what circumstances internships were allowed.* A few respondents indicated that because of state law, the IHE could not arbitrarily allow internships. One individual indicated that the state in which the IHE operated did not allow students to be paid for student teaching. Another state allowed students to complete licensure requirements while employed if they had worked as special education paraprofessionals for 2 years. A third respondent commented, “State law allows 2 years of service as a contract teacher to substitute for student teaching.”

DISCUSSION

More than two thirds of the participants responded that a formal partnership existed between their IHE and schools for special education field experiences. However, only 12 IHEs were current members of the NNER or the Holmes Partnership, and only four respondents used the label *professional development schools* when describing their partnerships.

Respondents may have interpreted the term *formal partnerships* differently. This became apparent in examining the comments regarding the formality of the partnerships. Some respondents described legal documents (e.g., contracts signed by both parties), whereas others described information-sharing documents (e.g., letters verifying student placements). Most likely, IHEs use both types of documents. For liability purposes, IHEs need legal documents that cover the teacher candidates’ presence in the schools, and information-sharing documents, such as placement assignments, are necessary for effective communication.

The variation in response to the formality question could be a function of the lack of clarity of the question, a lack of understanding of the individuals completing the questionnaire, or both. For example, we have experienced instances where legal documents are signed between the IHEs and the schools, but administrators higher than the placement coordinator for special education (e.g., the college dean or the university president) sign the documents. Thus, the coordinator may not be aware of the legal documentation.

Respondents did indicate that formal partnerships were more likely to occur in dealing with student teaching. Less formality seemed necessary for pre-student teaching fieldwork. In some respects, this lack of formality makes sense, given that students are reportedly required to spend on average one half to one third the amount of time in the schools

during pre-student teaching fieldwork as during student teaching. Moreover, the pre-student teaching fieldwork is often attached to coursework, such as methods of instruction, and the students do not assume as much responsibility in the classroom as they do during student teaching. On the other hand, liability and accurate communication are important regardless of the amount of time that students spend in the field.

As faculty and staff at IHEs enter into formal written partnerships with schools, one would expect the formal partnership to define the field placement for preservice teachers. However, the results of this study indicate extensive variability in the processes that appear rooted in the idiosyncrasies of the special education programs across the country. Only three IHEs indicated that their formal partnerships defined solely the field placements and assignments. These three IHEs represented only 25% of those that stated that their IHE belonged to the NNER or the Holmes Partnership. This low number may be reflected in several comments regarding the separation of general and special education. A few participants indicated that formal partnerships existed for general education but not for special education. This discrepancy could be attributed to an insufficient number of special education placements in general education partner schools, to the lack of special education's integration into IHE-school partnership efforts, or both. On the other hand, some IHEs appeared to be integrating special and general education for field placements. Two participants specifically indicated that formal partnerships existed for both general and special education, with one stating that the combined special and general education field experiences were the most formal.

The formality of the partnership, however, does not necessarily indicate the quality of the relationship between the IHE and schools. In fact, other factors are probably more important. Both parties, for example, must have a shared vision and a clear understanding of their individual and collective roles and responsibilities. Clark (1999b) stated, "Partnerships succeed only when participants have the same clear understanding of the collaboration's purpose and function. This is best achieved by extended conversations among the participants, not by formal agreement drafted by a few and passively accepted by others." (p. 168). Although Clark was speaking in terms of PDSs, this concept is also important when dealing with informal partnerships.

University and college faculty do not naturally share the same functions as teachers in the schools. In fact, they represent two distinct cultures. Traditionally, the role of the IHE is to prepare teacher candidates who go forward into the schools to fulfill the teacher's responsibility of educating society's children. Those advocating for true partnerships suggest that the two bodies need to blend and create a third culture—a task not accomplished easily. "The partnership literature is replete with calls to blend cultures, to create a third culture out of a mix of university and school cultures. The problem is

widely recognized and its complexity underappreciated; few institutions appear to have succeeded in resolving it" (Bulough et al., 1999, p. 387).

The data collected in this study do not provide information on the quality or intensity of the partnerships between schools and IHEs. The results do suggest that most IHEs continue to initiate the partnerships, to identify quality mentor/cooperating teachers, and to invite teachers and principals to participate. The data also suggest that the triadic model of practicum supervision is applied, typically with one teacher candidate being accountable to both a mentor/cooperating teacher and a university supervisor. Additional data are needed to evaluate whether these individuals are working in a true collaborative partnership or, as has been more common, in divergent ways.

In nearly one fourth of the cases (23.7%), teacher candidates were evaluated in special education pre-student teaching field experiences only by either the cooperating/mentor teacher or the university supervisor, rather than both. This was not the case during student teaching, where feedback and observations from both individuals were generally used to evaluate the teacher candidates' fieldwork.

Most IHE programs, with the exception of a few outliers, appear to have extensive field-based components, as indicated by the number of hours required for participation in early field experiences and student teaching. The average number of 163.4 contact hours required in pre-student teaching equals nearly 1 month of full-time fieldwork; whereas 456.7 contact hours, the average required for student teaching, represents almost 12 weeks of full-time fieldwork. The interpretation of these numbers, however, must be tempered by the wide ranges reported (see Table 2).

A relatively high percentage (41.4%) of the IHEs allowed teacher candidates to complete fieldwork on the job. This is not surprising given the severe national shortage of special educators. We thought, in fact, that this percentage would be higher. This percentage makes sense, however, given that a bachelor's degree is generally required to obtain a teaching position and that 48.6% of the respondents completed the questionnaire as it related to a graduate, postbaccalaureate, or combination program.

We found it curious that nearly two thirds of the respondents did not answer the question regarding their IHE's membership in the NNER or the Holmes Partnership. Of those who did respond, approximately one fourth stated that they did not know. We believe that this low percentage speaks to the lack of special educators' understanding of or involvement in national teacher preparation and school renewal efforts or both.

The results of this study must be examined and interpreted within the context of its limitations. The return rate of 53.0% could be viewed as a limitation. Although some researchers might consider this a low return rate, there is no wide consensus regarding the response rates that are consid-

ered adequate (Drew, Hardman, & Hart, 1996). Every effort was made to solicit and encourage completion and return of the surveys.

Another limitation is the lack of teachers' voices in this study. Only IHEs were surveyed. It would, in fact, be interesting to examine descriptively and comparatively how IHE faculty and school educators respond to the questions posed in this study, particularly as they relate to the elements of their partnership. Additional qualitative data collected through interviews, for example, could provide valuable insights into the quality and intensity of school–university partnerships in the context of special education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the limited involvement of special education in school–university partnerships in spite of the national emphasis on these partnerships, we suggest the following:

- Special educators and teacher educators who prepare future special education teachers should become more knowledgeable about the school–university partnership efforts, if any, between their IHE and their community's schools. If the IHE's or the school's membership in the NNER or the Holmes Partnership is unknown, educators should inquire. Minimally, special educators should be conversant with the partnership movement in general education.
- General educators engaged in school–university partnerships at both the IHE and the school level should involve special educators by inviting them to participate in activities related to the partnership's teacher education and school renewal efforts. However, it is possible that direct involvement in the partnership efforts does not match the special education teacher preparation program (e.g., an insufficient number of special education placements within partner schools). Therefore, special educators should be invited but not forced to become involved in partnership activities.
- Educators may wish to examine the degree of formality and informality of their school–university partnerships for special education field experience. It may, for example, be important for liability and communication purposes to engage in more formal partnerships for pre–student teaching experiences.
- The results of this study provide a national perspective on the fieldwork requirements for

teacher candidates in special education. Given the variability of the responses received, those participating in school–university partnerships may wish to use our reported data to revisit their field experience requirements, such as the types of evaluation instruments used and the number of fieldwork credits required of students enrolled in their special education teacher preparation programs. ■

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