

Special Education Student Teaching Practices

GREG CONDERMAN, JOE MORIN, AND J. TODD STEPHENS

ABSTRACT: This article presents findings of our nationwide study of undergraduate special education student teaching practices. The authors were especially interested in grading systems, assignments, supervision practices, and unique challenges. Results indicated variability in grading systems, use of traditional assignments such as lesson plans, use of student reflection through portfolios or journals, and challenges associated with locating student teaching placements that reflect research-based practices and parallel the conceptual framework of the teacher preparation program.

KEY WORDS: clinical experiences, field experiences, student teaching, teacher preparation

Each year, thousands of preservice teachers nationwide enter their student teaching experience. Student teaching provides the first real opportunity for students to think as teachers, inquire actively rather than passively (Posner, 1985), and connect general knowledge with particular students and situations (Schon, 1987). Furthermore, student teaching or practicum experiences (a) link teacher candidates to the actual teaching setting; (b) exemplify the concept of learning through experience; (c) produce a high degree of positive emotional involvement; (d) stimulate personal and professional growth; (e) offer the opportunity for one-on-one teaching encounters; (f) produce goals that are internally imposed rather than externally imposed; and (g) allow prospective teachers to be inducted into the teaching milieu (Henry, 1989). In short, student teaching represents a potentially intense and valuable learning experience involving a major life transition from student to teacher (Webber, 1994).

Near the conclusion of preservice preparation, teacher educators select the student teaching location and the cooperating teachers and reemphasize the professional behaviors that will be rewarded and the theories, practices, and philosophies that will be reinforced (Lemlech & Kaplan, 1990). For these and other reasons, field-based experiences are often considered the most important component of teacher preparation programs. Indeed, preservice teachers usually rate student teaching as the most valuable experience of their preparation (Guyton & McIntyre, 1990).

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The student teaching experience may also influence a teacher's decision to remain in the field. A growing body of evidence indicates that teachers who lack adequate initial preparation are more likely to leave the profession. Conversely, the more preparation prospective teachers receive, the more likely they are to remain in the profession (Darling-Hammond, 2003). According to The National Center for Education Statistics, 29% of new teachers without student teaching experience left the profession within 5 years, compared with only 15% who had completed student teaching as part of their preparation program. Similarly, whereas 45% of those who have no record of completing a student teaching experience and were also not certified reported that they would teach again, 80% of those certified to teach reported that they would teach again. The degree to which teachers received training in pedagogy was associated with their decision to remain in the field (Henke, Chen, & Geis, 2000). In 2000, new teachers who had received training in curriculum, instruction, and child psychology, completed student teaching, and received feedback on their teaching left the profession at rates half as much as those who did not have these experiences (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003).

Quality teacher preparation largely depends on the quality of field-based experiences (O'Shea, Hammite, Mainzer, & Crutchfield, 2000). Unfortunately, in some cases field experiences socialize preservice teachers into existing school cultures and patterns that do not represent best practice (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996). For skills to become rooted in best-practice, entry-level practitioners need extended field-experiences mentored by qualified special educators and supervised by university personnel (NCTAF, 1996). In contrast, most U.S. teachers have had a relatively thin preservice teacher education experience, with only a short supervised student teaching experience (Kaplan & Owings, 2003). Severe teacher shortages in special education have resulted in the hiring of many teachers who lack appropriate certification and preparation and who do not share the technical skills and knowledge received by today's preservice teachers.

This difficulty, along with the relatively high rates of teacher burn out and job turnover has created a shortage of highly skilled and seasoned professionals to appropriately nurture, teach, and support less experienced professionals (Renzaglia, Hutchins, & Lee, 1997).

According to the literature, several factors affect student teaching success. These include the theoretical and conceptual framework of the teacher education program, the knowledge and skills of the cooperating teacher and the university supervisor, the ecology of the school, and the student teacher's own educational experiences (Renzaglia et al., 1997). Selected issues surrounding each of these elements will be briefly discussed.

One important component of the student teaching experience is the conceptual framework of the teacher preparation program. A well-defined conceptual framework helps preservice teachers relate theory to practice (McIntyre et al., 1996). Guyton and McIntyre (1990) observed a general lack of a theoretical base for field experiences in teacher education programs, and Goodlad, Soder, and Sirotnik (1990) concluded that teacher education programs lack an organized approach linking courses and field experiences within a conceptual framework. This void results in incongruence in definition, purpose, and goals for the teaching experience.

When student teachers do not have a conceptual framework on which to reflect, the cooperating teacher can exert more influence on beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions (Renzaglia et al., 1997). In fact, Richardson-Koehler (1988) discovered that after just 2 weeks in the field, student teachers attributed most of their dispositions and practices to their cooperating teachers, rather than their university preparation. Johnson (1987) noted that student teachers model even those behaviors of their cooperating teachers that received disapproval from their university supervisor.

Another important component of the student teaching experience is the cooperating teacher. Cooperating teachers are a vital partner, role model, and mentor in the student teaching experience. Despite their influential position, cooperating teachers often are chosen because they

volunteer rather than because they represent the attitudes, beliefs, or best practices associated with the teacher education program (Renzaglia et al., 1997). Furthermore, few cooperating teachers have any significant supervision preparation (Meade, 1991). These problems are compounded when teacher education programs fail to provide cooperating teachers with clear direction regarding student teaching expectations.

The university supervisor represents the teacher education program and usually assumes the role of evaluator (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). Notwithstanding their significance in overall preparation, supervisors frequently hold the lowest university teaching rank, have the fewest skills to impart to student teachers (Haberman, 1983), and often are chosen based on their availability rather than their supervision skills (Warger & Aldinger, 1984). Furthermore, because supervisors often are overburdened by their caseload numbers, they may have limited opportunities to observe each student teacher. Consequently, they may actually have little influence on shaping knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Baumgart & Ferguson, 1991).

Another element of student teaching is the ecology of the student teaching placement. The school ecology includes factors such as the feel or climate of the school, the administrative style, the type of classroom, the age and grade level of the students, the educational philosophy modeled by the teachers, the personality of the cooperating teacher, and the structure of the special education classroom (Renzaglia et al., 1997). Most of these factors are beyond the control of the university; however, they may greatly influence the beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions of the student teacher and subsequently, the first year teacher (Zeichner & Gore, 1990).

The student teacher's previous educational experiences and educational frame of reference also highly influence the student teaching experience. The years spent being a student shape beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions toward teaching models (Borko & Mayfield, 1995). These experiences most often take place in general education settings, rather than special education settings, and they may not have represented best practice. It is not surprising that the student teacher's intellec-

tual and attitudinal baggage associated with such experiences is difficult to replace or modify (e.g., Dunkin, Precians, & Nettle, 1994).

Despite the importance of student teaching, there is relatively little research on field experiences in special education teacher preparation programs. For example, we know relatively little about how field experiences are evaluated (McIntyre et al., 1996). Few teacher preparation programs assess the quality of the university supervisor's supervision (Conderman, Katsiyannis, & Franks, 2001), which is another factor that likely undermines the integrity of field experiences (Cruikshank & Armaline, 1986). Little research has also been conducted on the effectiveness of various student teaching supervision models, as well as the linkages among the theoretical framework of the teacher preparation program, school experiences, and supervision strategies. Therefore, authorities have called for an examination of the roles of university supervisors, cooperating teachers, student teaching placements, and supervision practices (Renzaglia et al., 1997). These investigations are especially timely as teacher education programs explore alternative certification routes, add rigor to their programs, respond to the challenge to produce highly qualified teachers (Brownell, Sindelar, Bishop, Langely, & Seo, 2002), reconfigure field experiences to meet professional competencies and standards (LaMontagne, Kenney, & Nelson, 2001), and respond to public criticism that special education teachers are inadequately prepared (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992). Accordingly, further research on the special education student teaching experience is necessary to extend the knowledge base, stimulate a discussion regarding best practices, and contribute to improved practices. Therefore, the purpose of this present study was to determine current practices in special education student teaching in the areas of (a) grading student teachers, (b) student teaching assignments, (c) supervision practices, and (d) special challenges faced by university supervisors.

Method

We randomly chose 100 institutions with undergraduate special education pro-

grams or endorsements from the Directory of Programs for Preparing Individuals for Careers in Special Education (Paschall, 1999). For each institution, we mailed surveys to the chair of the special education department with special attention to the field experience coordinator. After second mailings and follow-up calls, we received completed surveys from 61% of the respondents. Twenty-five participants were from midwestern states, 13 from western states, 10 from eastern states, 6 from southern states, and 7 from eastern/southeastern coastal states, as defined by *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges* (2002). Six institutions had full-time undergraduate enrollment over 15,000, 22 had full-time undergraduate enrollment between 5,000 and 15,000, and 33 had full-time undergraduate enrollment under 5,000. The number of full-time faculty in the special education departments ranged from 1 to 25, with a mean of 7.4. The number of undergraduate students in the education department ranged from 2 to 641, with a mean of 171. Seventeen institutions were private and 17 had doctoral programs.

Drawing on the accumulated literature on student teaching and our own areas of interest, we developed a two-page, five-part survey that was reviewed, tested, and submitted for external validation by special education professors at three institutions, a special education consultant from an intermediate education agency, and a university student-teaching coordinator. Their feedback was incorporated into the final instrument. A student researcher entered data from returned surveys using the StatView statistical program (1998). Data reliability was established by having a second graduate student independently code 10% of the surveys. Comparison of codes revealed a 100% response agreement.

Part 1 of the survey requested respondents to supply their name, institution, the number of full-time faculty members in the special education department, and the number of full-time undergraduate students in special education. In Part 2, respondents selected (from a list of four options) their method of grading student teachers. They also answered four open-ended questions regarding their grading rationale, the percentage of student teach-

ers receiving various grades (A–F or S/U) and the individual ultimately responsible for assigning the final grade. In Part 3, respondents identified (from a list of 17 items) required student teaching assignments. They also indicated which assignments required a written reflection. In part 4, respondents answered five open-ended questions about the length of the special education student teaching experience, the number of supervision visits, the suggested length of each visit, the person who completes the majority of supervision, and whether or not supervisors use a common observational method. We also asked respondents if the student teaching experience was considered a formative or summative experience. In two open-ended questions in Part 5, we asked respondents to share their biggest student teaching challenge and offer any other comments pertinent to the study.

Results

Grading the Student Teacher

We first asked respondents to specify their student teaching grading practices. Forty-eight percent of respondents reported using a letter grade (A–F) to evaluate student teachers and 86% indicated that 80–100% of their student teachers typically received an A. The most frequent reason given for using letter grades was that they differentiate among student teachers by offering more specific information about the student's performance. Other reasons included: grades provide a frame of reference for employers, local superintendents requested letter grades, university tradition, a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory system is too vague because an "S" covers a wide range of skills, and letter grades are consistent with the grading system for other courses. Four respondents noted that students earning a C or lower are not recommended for a license, whereas two respondents noted that students receive a letter grade only for the student teaching seminar.

Forty-five percent of the respondents reported using a satisfactory/unsatisfactory system with 97% indicating that at least 90% of the student teachers received an S. Justifying this system, respondents indicated that there are too many variables in student teaching to assign a letter grade, the

S/U system encourages risk-taking without the fear of grades, a great deal of subjectivity is associated with letter grades, and a letter grade in a 12-credit student teaching experience would heavily impact the student's cumulative grade point average (GPA). Finally, about 7% of the institutions reported using a credit/no credit evaluation system. These respondents indicated that this system most appropriately parallels their competency-based student-teaching approach.

Eighty-one percent of respondents indicated that the university supervisor ultimately determines the student teaching grade. About 6% indicated that the university supervisor and the cooperating teacher together make that decision, and another 6% indicated that the director of student teaching makes that decision. Less than 2% indicated that the (a) instructor of the student teaching course, (b) the dean of the school, (c) the special education coordinator, or (d) the university supervisor, cooperating teacher, and the field experience coordinator together determine the final student teaching grade.

Student Teaching Assignments

We asked respondents to specify student teaching assignments. As shown in Table 1, assignments associated with instruction, supervision, and assessment

Assignment	%
Write lesson plans	97
Instruct in special education class	93
Use informal assessment	92
Attend IEP meeting	92
Supervise groups of students	88
Use technology	82
Reflect on experience	80
Use formal assessment	76
Cowrite IEP	75
Develop learning materials	71
Attend in-service	70
Develop behavior-change project	64
Contact parents	59
Write assessment report	58
Coteach with general educator	54
Grade students with disabilities	53
Develop bulletin boards	42
Audio- or videotape lesson	36

were required by over 80% of participating institutions. Over three-fourths of the institutions require students to reflect on their experience, usually through a reflective journal and/or portfolio, as noted by 50% of those institutions. Less than 2% required students to make home visits, work with a paraprofessional, or attend a prereferral team meeting.

Supervision

Survey respondents provided information regarding their supervision practices. Eighty-six percent reported using a common observational form, that is, a standard form used by all special education university supervisors. Ninety-eight percent provide feedback to student teachers orally, 94% provide written feedback, 94% provide immediate feedback, and 40% provide feedback through follow-up opportunities. Eighty-four percent reported choosing cooperating teachers based on their experience, 78% consider location, 68% consider expertise, 66% consider willingness to teach, 62% consider the cooperating teacher's ability to model best practices, 50% use reputation, 38% consider the cooperating teacher's connection to the university, and 28% consider whether or not the cooperating teacher has received supervision training. Sixteen percent indicated that their choice of a cooperating teacher was based on a recommendation from a building principal or the school board. Two percent considered factors such as whether or not the cooperating teacher received tenure, whether or not the setting was a professional development school, and whether or not an appropriate level of diversity was present in the school. Forty-nine percent indicated that cooperating teachers are required to have some training in supervision before accepting a student teacher. This training varied considerably from an informal visit with the university supervisor to review expectations and materials to a three credit graduate course on supervision. The most frequent supervision-training format for cooperating teachers was a workshop, as reported by 53% of those who require supervision training. Other formats included: seminars (18%), brief meetings (18%), and courses (11%).

Respondents also reported on the num-

ber and length of supervision visits. For those on a quarter system, 80% indicated that typically university supervisors make four observational visits, and 20% indicated that three visits per quarter were most common. For those on a semester system, 33% of the university supervisors typically make four visits, 28% make six visits, 13% make eight visits, and 11% make five visits. Sixty percent indicated that each observational visit lasts between 30–60 minutes, 32% observe for 30 minutes or less during each visit, 6% observe between 60 and 90 minutes, and 2% observe for over 90 minutes.

Respondents indicated who supervises student teachers. Fifty-five percent of the respondents indicated that tenure track faculty members conduct 60–100% of the student teaching supervision. Specifically, 43% indicated that tenure track faculty members conduct 80–100% of the supervision. Slightly over one fourth of the respondents noted that adjunct faculty members supervise 60–100% of the student teachers. Ninety-five percent of the respondents reported that graduate students account for 0% to 20% of the supervision. Sixty-two percent of respondents indicated that student teaching is considered a summative experience, and 38% view it as a formative experience.

Finally, we asked respondents to specify the most significant student teaching challenge. The most frequent response (29%) was appropriating adequate resources in terms of time, travel, and other university resources (e.g., credit load). The second most frequently noted challenge (25%) was selecting and retaining qualified cooperating teachers who share the philosophy of the teacher preparation program. Other challenges included finding “good” cooperating teachers in certain disability areas, as well as geographical areas (i.e., rural). Similarly, 19% of the respondents indicated that finding appropriate placements was their biggest challenge. Specific challenges included finding placements that reflect diversity, meeting the student teacher's needs for a placement with students of a particular disability, finding good secondary sites, locating a variety of placements to avoid overloading specific teachers, and realizing that one placement may not provide enough experience for some students.

Thirteen percent of the respondents indicated that their biggest challenge was finding qualified supervisors. Less than 7% of the respondents indicated that their biggest challenge was with the experience itself. Finally, less than 7% indicated that the student teachers themselves were the biggest challenge. Issues included the reality that the student was not socially or emotionally prepared for student teaching, they would automatically receive an A, or they would be allowed to student teach in their home district.

Discussion

In the present study, we explored special education undergraduate student teaching practices. Based on a review of the literature, we were especially interested in grading systems, assignments, supervision issues, and special challenges faced by teacher preparation programs.

Results indicated that about half of the teacher preparation programs use a traditional letter grading system, whereas the other half use a pass/fail or credit/no credit system. Similar results were noted from Prater and Sileo (2004). Those using a traditional system maintain that letter grades more clearly distinguish among student teachers and send a distinct message to future employers. However, if the majority of student teachers expect and in fact receive As, one wonders whether or not letter grades are fulfilling their primary purpose. Are we to conclude that almost all special education student teachers are outstanding and deserve the highest possible grade? What does an "A" really mean?

Interestingly, during the course of our study, several cooperating teachers shared their reluctance to suggest anything other than an "A" to avoid legal confrontation. In other words, they do not want to be responsible for hindering subsequent employment, and any grade lower than an "A" is, in their opinion, considered a "red flag." Honest, meaningful and forthright feedback is critical in preparing quality teachers. Further, the chosen evaluation system should be consistent with the program philosophy and conceptual framework and offer clear expectations for grading. This is important, as Schuster and Stevens (1991) noted that a common concern cited by students is the lack of clarity regarding performance expectations.

Although debate about grades will probably continue, perhaps a bigger issue is whether or not administrators even consider the student teaching grade when filling vacancies. In other words, as long as special education is a high-need area, how important is the student teaching evaluation as long as the applicant is certified—or simply available? According to the Office of Special Education Programs (2002), more than 12,000 special education teaching positions remained unfilled nationwide, and 10% of special education teachers lack special education expertise. It might be tempting to reduce standards and inflate evaluation systems. In fact, teacher preparation programs vary in standards for candidates, programs, curricula, and quality of faculty. Furthermore, licensing varies in rigor, exceptions differ from state to state, and some states make no effort to screen out even the weakest applicant for a teaching license (Kaplan & Owings, 2003). Yet easy entry into the profession conflicts with the requirements of offering high-quality, intensive, professional development initiated through Individuals With Disabilities Education Act 1997 (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 1997). In short, certification can be a strong predictor of teacher quality only in teacher preparation programs where content knowledge is linked to teaching practices and students have many real-world opportunities to integrate and use what they learn in well-supervised settings (Darling-Hammond, 2003).

Our results suggest that traditional paper-type assignments in assessment and instruction are given more attention, whereas less attention is given to tasks involving collaboration or consultation skills, (e.g., working with paraprofessionals, meeting parents, or collaborating with general educators.) Written artifacts may be easier (than collaborative skills) to quantify and evaluate and more objective to present in case of a grade dispute, and skills in assessment are needed to meet requirements associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001). However, beginning teachers often are challenged when they encounter situations that require collaboration skills (Billingsley & Tomchin, 1992; Conderman & Stephens, 2000; Kilgore & Griffin, 1998). Infusing collabora-

tive activities into field experiences may require additional training for cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and building or district level personnel.

Eighty percent of the institutions we surveyed indicated that their student teaching experience included opportunities for student reflection, most often in the form of a portfolio or journal. Some experts assert that portfolios provide a more accurate picture of abilities, including one's potential for success in actual teaching (Danielson, 1996); provide opportunities to view a teacher's work in context; and place the teacher in the role of self-evaluator, documenter, and planner (Bloom & Bacon, 1995). Requiring performance-based artifacts supports current thinking regarding the development of reflective thinking and teaching while paralleling the intent of various teacher education standards (Morin & Conderman, 2003). Renzaglia et al., (1997), among others, encourage a cohesive, integrated set of experiences provided throughout the teacher preparation program that facilitate reflection.

Respondents indicated that tenure-track university professors (rather than adjunct instructors or graduate students) provided the majority of the student teaching supervision. These results differ from earlier studies (i.e., Haberman, 1983), yet agree with recent findings (i.e., Prater & Sileo, 2004), and may reflect a renewed interest in recognizing the integrity and legitimacy of working with preservice teachers and the importance of supporting their transition from student to professional. Our results confirm that the university supervisor continues to assume the primary evaluator role. Unfortunately, the student teacher-supervisor relationship may be contrived and void of honest reflection and problem solving when this occurs (Renzaglia et al., 1997).

Slightly less than half of the institutions we surveyed indicated that they require specific supervision training for cooperating teachers, which is a requirement for most accreditation reviews. This confirms other findings (i.e., Prater & Sileo, 2004); however, the reasons are unclear. It may be that these institutions were not seeking accreditation, or perhaps the individual completing the survey was unsure of training requirements. However, a modest

body of research supports that training is necessary to produce effective cooperating teachers (Glickman & Bey, 1990). O'Reilly & Renzaglia (1994) suggest supervisor training (for cooperating teachers or university supervisors) at least once during the academic year, prior to the beginning of a semester. Various authors suggest using an empirically proven supervision-training model that includes videotapes of classroom instruction, periodic reliability checks, and established performance criteria (i.e., Pelletier, 1995; O'Reilly & Renzaglia, 1994; Schuster & Stevens 1991). We suspect that these are important strategies to determine highly qualified teachers (NCLB, 2001).

Finally, respondents voiced concern about challenges associated with student teaching, ranging from the limited availability of resources (e.g., time, money, and travel), logistical issues for student teacher's best placement, and dealing with the students themselves (such as academically capable students who cannot relate to children). Given current budget issues and the emphasis on content over pedagogy, we suspect that these issues will continue. We encourage teacher educators to critically look for creative responses to these challenges.

Proposed responses, however, must maintain the integrity and legitimacy of the student teaching experience. One important step in the nation's quest for highly qualified teachers is through a summative field experience that integrates pedagogy, content knowledge, and dispositions within a framework that allows for critical discussion and reflection.

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