Supporting the Well-Being of Pre-Service Teachers during Field Practice

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Abstract

Education Preparation Programs (EPPs) have greatly improved in incorporating meaningful and concrete field experiences for pre-service teacher candidates. They have done so by integrating university coursework with field-site experiences that provide their teacher candidates with increased clinically rich opportunities to put theory into practice (Capello, 2020). Researchers agree that practical phases during pre-service teaching involve experiences relevant to future teachers' well-being (Dreer, 2021). Because such phases enrich classroom learning by providing authentic experiences and learning opportunities, teacher education programs worldwide mandate field experience in their curricula (Zeichner, 2012). Coursework and field experience integrations are commonalities within traditional and alternate route EPPs. Traditional route programs often involve multiple opportunities for working with students through fieldwork, internships, and clinical practice before becoming a teacher of record, while alternate route programs allow one to be hired as a teacher of record in a content-specific classroom while enrolled in a teacher preparation program simultaneously (NJSTEMTeachers.org). Although the duration of the programs and the number of course hours may differ, both programs consist of courses that include field experiences. Situating teacher preparation within clinically rich practice seeks to bridge the theory-practice gap that plagues teacher education (AACTE, 2018). However, it fails to address the underlying issue of pre-service teachers' well-being while in the field. As a result, many pre-service teachers exhibit feelings of helplessness, burnout, and stress (Yeo, 2021). The demands and expectations of student teaching have drastically changed over the past two decades. Yet, critiques of the variations in the quality and support of teacher candidates during field service by policymakers, academics, and advocacy groups are mixed, with most citing teacher education as a weak, largely ineffective intervention (NAP, 2020). This paper will explore current literature supporting the well-being of pre-service teachers in the areas of self-efficacy, mentorship, and mental health with the intent of providing strategies and best practices that can be implemented in programs that include field practices.

Pre-Service Teacher's Self-Efficacy and Field Performance

Pre-service teachers begin forming professional identities during their engagement and interactions with students, teachers, and administrators. These interactions occur mainly during field practice and are included throughout the student's program matriculation. As they engage more in the education profession, pre-service teachers begin forming their own professional identities, considered valuable elements of their lives. This professional identity is considered self-efficacy, or their personal belief about their ability to carry out specific teaching tasks. Research supports that novice teachers who understand and can relate to others are more likely to understand their role and effectiveness as teachers (MacLure, 1993). Pre-service teachers' ideological beliefs begin to develop during the initial phases of field practice. During the beginning of a student's educational journey, they begin to shape their educational philosophies of what education is, the role and importance of education, and how impactful they will be in the profession. Unfortunately, students who have bad experiences or encounters with ineffective instructors and in-service teachers during field placement often begin to question their ability to teach. Many become unmotivated and unenthusiastic about becoming a future educator. Teachers' motivational beliefs influence their professional decision-making, teaching practices, efforts, ways of accomplishing tasks, and

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approaches to teaching (Lauermann & Berger, 2021; Shahzad & Naureen, 2017). According to Bandura, self-efficacy specifically deals with one's belief in their ability to successfully perform or complete a task or a course of action (Bandura, 1997). Therefore, pre-service teacher self-efficacy reflects the extent to which an aspiring educator believes in their ability and capability to effectively provide instructional practices that can positively impact student achievement and student success (Zee & Koomen, 2016). An inspiring teacher's view of themself and their ability to teach plays a major role in their success during field practice. This concept of self-awareness is supported by Bandura's social-cognitive theory of behavioral change, which suggests that people learn social behaviors by observing and imitating the behaviors of others (Sutton, 2021). For example, an instructor attending a professional development may imitate and include some of the material learned during that training in their instruction to improve their technique and style of content delivery.

Similarly, this also occurs when pre-service teachers observe effective or ineffective teachers during field practice (Bandura, 1986, 2006). Their experiences or observations of others in the field often drive the narrative of how they visualize themselves as a teacher of record. Therefore, educator preparation programs must be intentional when providing field placement opportunities for students. EPPs must begin considering where students are placed, with whom they are placed, and how that placement will negatively or positively impact their self-image. Acknowledging the individualistic cultural structures that support the teacher candidate's self-efficacy and autonomy prepares teacher candidates to persevere in their profession with the emotional readiness and confidence that they can perform a task while gaining an understanding of their individuality. (Pintrich& De Groot, 1990, Pintrich et al., 1991).

Building Self-Efficacy through Resilience

With the current teacher shortage crisis impacting school districts nationwide, many district officials and administrators are shifting to teacher recruitment, resilience, and retention. This is a slight change from the past when districts mainly focused on recruitment and retention. Although important areas, recruitment and retention do little to address the issue of retaining teachers. Recent research has discovered that teachers' resilience is a significant factor associated with motivation, persistence, and retention in teaching (Brunetti, 2006; Johnson et al., 2014; Yost, 2006). Building teacher resilience to withstand the demands and challenges of teaching is now a primary goal for many school district training and professional developments. Although this change is necessary, building teacher resilience should not begin after hiring teachers. Instead, resilience support and training should begin during the pre-service teacher's teacher preparation before becoming a teacher of record. Researchers Gu and Day (2013) stressed the need to explore internal and external factors that affect pre-service teachers' resilience and ultimately impact teachers' self-efficacy. (Pajares, 1996; Pendergast et al., 2011; Sammons et al., 2007; Yost, 2006).

The Impact on Mental Health during Field Experiences

The Role of Field Experience

Field experience can positively and negatively impact pre-service teachers' mental health. Positively, field experience offers priceless opportunities for practical learning that can strengthen professional identity, improve teaching abilities, and increase confidence. Enabling pre-service teachers to apply their theoretical knowledge in practical settings gives them a sense of validation and accomplishment. The well-being of teachers is closely linked to student well-being and academic success (American Psychiatric Association, 2019). According to the American Psychiatric Association (2019), teachers experience higher levels of well-being and maintain positive relationships with students, which positively affects students' psychological distress and overall well-being; conversely, when teachers are absent or unwell, it correlates with increased student distress and poorer well-being. Field experience can also be stressful and challenging, which may adversely affect pre-service teachers' mental health. According to Adams et al. (2023), "field experiences are key in developing PST's knowledge about students and teaching in general" (p.01). Field experiences in teacher education are often mentioned as the most vital and impactful component of the program of study (Adams et al., 2023; Sorensen, 2014; Darling-Hammond, 2015). Kent & Giles (2016) discuss Imig and Imig (2006) teacher development as having two primary options: the just and unjust.

> "The "just" path is one in which learning creates a connection between the teacher and student. In addition to learning alongside the students and accepting that both parties are teachers and learners, the student-teacher imparts important and meaningful knowledge to them. While considering the students' interests, the "just" path acknowledges the importance of standards-based instruction. On this route, educators strive to maintain a close relationship between academic progress and student involvement. The just path permits educators to be change agents because, in the ever-evolving classroom of today,

students have diverse needs and skills. To meet the unique needs of every student, a new teacher must possess the ability to adapt continuously. (p.2)

Analyzing Imig & Imig (2006) The "unjust" path, Kent & Giles (2016) describe it as:

Educators must develop and flourish alongside their students. Teachers on the unjust path cannot meet their students' needs due to the overwhelming challenges they experience. Rather than inspiring or motivating their students to learn at higher levels, they often go into survival mode and give their students recited facts and information. (p.2)

As Kent & Giles (2016) explain, Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) must prepare future educators to be learners and teachers. They must also comprehend the importance of training highly skilled educators who put forth great effort to inspire, encourage, and design suitable learning environments for each student. Recognizing the importance of mental well-being during field experiences is crucial.

Positive Impact

Field experience plays a crucial role in preparing pre-service teachers for the complexities of the teaching profession, fostering their growth, confidence, and commitment to excellence. According to Zeichner (2012), field experiences aid pre-service teachers in forming a more comprehensive professional perspective and comprehension of students in grades PK–12, schools, and the cultural contexts surrounding teaching and learning. Pre-service teachers must take part in field experiences that offer experiences in settings different from those they encountered as P–12 students if they are to broaden their understanding of teaching and learning beyond "traditional" school settings, or what Lortie (1975) called "apprenticeships of observation" (Kent & Giles, 2016; Brayko, 2013). The positive impact on pre-service teachers is that field experiences can contribute to their professional development and well-being. Such an experience provides hands-on learning opportunities in which these pre-service teachers have opportunities to apply theoretical knowledge learned through their EPPs and apply them in real-world teaching settings. These students' understanding of classroom management, teaching strategies, and student-teacher interactions also increases. Engaging in field experience allows pre-service teachers to gain confidence in their abilities. Their self-assurance grows as they successfully plan and deliver lessons, manage classroom dynamics, and build relationships with students, preparing them for their future careers.

The practicum experience helps shape pre-service teachers' professional self-identity. Experiencing the rewards and challenges of the work, these students start to internalize the values, beliefs, and practices that characterize teaching as a profession. Pre-service teachers can get feedback from peers, supervisors, and mentor teachers during their field experience (Koh, 2009). By receiving constructive feedback, students can pinpoint areas for development and improvement. Pre-service teachers learn and sharpen various teaching skills, such as creating lesson plans, delivering instruction, creating assessments, and managing the classroom.

Negative Impact

The pressures of student teaching can be overwhelming. Goldstein & Lake (2003) describe how pre-service teachers adopt a more practical approach to teaching, abandoning thoughtful and reflective teaching practices. Teaching diverse student populations, behavioral issues, and classroom management challenges can be overwhelming for pre-service teachers. According to Kent & Giles (2016), Pre-service teachers tend to feel unprepared to run a classroom when they start teaching, and balancing coursework, assignments, and personal life while in field experience can be challenging for students. Pre-service teachers may feel overburdened by their workload and need help managing their time. While necessary for development, getting feedback from mentor teachers and supervisors can be upsetting. Positive or constructive criticism can affect confidence and their sense of belonging. Their well-being may suffer due to the emotional labor tied to teaching. During their field experiences, some pre-service teachers might feel alone, especially if their peers or mentor teachers are not encouraging.

To mitigate the negative impact of field experience on pre-service teachers' mental health, EPPs must provide ongoing support, including mentorship, counseling services if needed, and opportunities for reflection and self-care. Encouraging students to communicate openly while offering constructive feedback and promoting positive learning environments can help pre-service teachers navigate the challenges effectively while promoting their mental well-being.

Mentorship and Why It Matters

Field experience is a significant component of any educator preparation program and is considered the essential learning experience for pre-service teachers. Mentoring pre-service teachers in their initial school-based

experience has been advocated as a reform in pre-service teacher education since the late 1980s (Hobson et al., 2012). Educator preparation programs value field experience as preparing pre-service teachers for entering classroom teaching. Supervision provided by mentor teachers provides guidance and promotes the learning needs of pre-service teachers during field experience (Al-Jaro et al., 2020). Good mentorship requires collaboration between teacher education institutions and the schools where pre-service teachers are placed so that all stakeholders understand the complexities associated with the teaching practice (Adie & Barton, 2012). Although pre-service teachers should have pedagogical content knowledge of the school subject they intend to teach, mentorship from experienced teachers with vast classroom experience should always be encouraged (Botha & Reddy, 2011). Pre-service teachers should be able to navigate from self-identity to development within the context of the wider environment during their teaching practice. They cannot do this without proper mentorship from experienced in-service teachers who have been exposed to all situations of the teaching profession, inside and outside of the classroom (Ntshangase & Nkosi, 2022). For mentorship to be beneficial, an effective mentoring relationship should be established. The roles and strategies adopted by the mentor to support the learning of the pre-service teacher should be adequate for the developmental requirements of the pre-service teacher (Canli & Hasan, 2024). The primary support that pre-service teachers receive from mentor teachers makes them arguably the most influential when it comes to the professional development of future teachers (Mutlu-Gülbak, 2023).

Mentorship for Pre-Service Teachers

Mentorship is described as a process or an activity that promotes an ongoing symbiotic relationship between an experienced in-service teacher (mentor) and a less-experienced pre-service teacher (mentee) by providing personal and professional support, development and well-being in preparation for the teaching profession in the school context (Aspfors & Fransson, 2015). Mentorship of pre-service teachers provides opportunities for observation, curricular development, and teaching so they can deepen their content and pedagogical knowledge and improve their teaching (Kratz & Davis, 2022). Encouraging teachers to observe one another's expertise or share with other professionals can help alleviate loneliness and lack of interaction for experienced teachers (Andrea, 2010). Being immersed in an environment that offers feedback allows the learner's ability to conceptualize through direct experience and reflection (Dewey, 1959). Mentorship lends itself to a collaborative environment where mentors and pre-service teachers can explore new approaches together. Through promoting observation and conversation about teaching, working with a pre-service teacher may encourage the mentor teacher to develop tools for continuous learning and renewed excitement for their profession and job (Ragins & Kram, 2007). Mentors learn from the pre-service teachers just as the pre-service teachers learn from their mentors.

Mentorship and Pre-Service Teachers' Well-Being

Teacher candidates often share that they need help to utilize their own cultural and linguistic K-12 and teacher education experiences in their student-teaching classroom (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Moll et al., 1992, as cited in Walker & Ardell, 2020). While they understand that mentor teachers drive what happens with students, teacher candidates sometimes end their student teaching experience feeling they have not sufficiently utilized their funds of identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Hogg & Volman, in press as cited in Walker & Ardell, 2020) as they have not had the opportunity to activate their funds of knowledge in the field. For example, teacher candidates feel tension between the implementation of a mandated curriculum that contradicts their personal beliefs and/or does not allow them to integrate what they have learned from their teacher education courses (Richmond et al., 2020; Roegman & Kolman, 2020 as cited in Walker & Ardell, 2020). Walker & Ardell (2020) found that mentorship between mentors and teacher candidates in the form of co-learning and co-reflecting strengthened relationships and student engagement. Teacher candidates could work with mentors to identify, explore, and enact their collective funds of knowledge and funds of identity for student engagement, which in return gave teacher candidates a sense of belonging.

The well-being of a pre-service teacher or mentee could be affected by the mentor and mentee relationship or organizational conditions of the field experience site. The mentee interacts with the mentor and other teachers, administrators, and students at the field experience site. These mentees' experiences of complex interactions can contribute to the professional experience of the mentee (Davis & Fantozzi, 2016 as cited in Canli & Demirtas, 2024). For example, mentees observe and communicate with other teachers at the field experience site to get information or resources. Acceptance by other teachers allows mentees to feel like teachers, while nonacceptance may lead to feelings of exclusion (Maynard, 2000 as cited in Canli & Demirtas, 2024). This exclusion can affect the mentee professional development and attitudes. Factors such as the acceptance of and respect for mentees as teachers by the students, the participation of mentees in educational activities, and satisfactory student feedback may affect mentees' development and attitudes. Furthermore, school principals play

a vital role in the establishment and development of the mentor-mentee relationship while the relationship between the principal and mentee is also important (Vierstraete, 2005 as cited in Canli & Demirtas, 2024). The school principal's attitudes and behavior towards mentees may affect their professional development and attitudes. Canli & Demirtas (2024) concluded that the mentor should be selected based on criteria such as professional competence, ability to perform mentoring roles, and positive interpersonal relationships. The teaching practice schools (field experience sites) should be selected based on human relations, educational activities, the quality of education and instruction, and the physical conditions of the school.

Mentorship matters in-field experience for pre-service teachers to build relationships and trust that will support their well-being. Ruich, Browning, & Butera (2020) found that there is value in long-term field placements that provide an opportunity for pre-service teachers to develop a relationship with a practicing teacher. Developing a relationship allows mentors and pre-service teachers to learn about each other and gain trust. This enables them to be forthcoming in communication to discuss complex issues in the inevitable uncertainty of teaching. The relationship solidifies as they identify beliefs and understandings, allowing pre-service teachers to implement practice from a mutually informed perspective. Gunawardena (2023) conducted a study to understand the constructive features of good mentoring relationships to reduce stress and enhance best practices in a hierarchical setting. The study situated mentoring within self-regulation and co-regulation. Self-regulation is the process in which pre-service teachers consciously coordinate, monitor behavior, adjust, and adapt to achieve success in learning situations (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000 as cited in Gunawardena, 2023). Hadwin et al. (2018) note co-regulation as a process in which mentors can assist pre-service teachers in developing such strategies for self-regulation (as cited in Gunawardena, 2023).

Effective mentorship for pre-service teachers will positively impact their well-being. Studies have shown that for mentorship to work well for pre-service teachers, there must be a great relationship established, pre-service teachers should feel a sense of belonging, the mentor should be strategically matched based on professional competence and ability to mentor, and there should be an opportunity for pre-service teachers to reflect, share, and adjust to build trust in the mentorship.

Conclusion

Educator preparation programs are instrumental in maintaining a continuous and successful support system for teacher candidates. In the past, EPPs have focused more on instilling the proper dispositions and pedagogical knowledge to support pre-service teachers' academic growth. However, more awareness and support for the well-being of pre-service teachers during field experiences has surfaced, and many EPPs are attempting to address the issue. Field practice and experience are considered critical aspects of teacher preparation (Cruickshank & Armaline, 1986). Therefore, educational systems must invest more in supporting teachers transitioning from practice to certified teachers of record. Though EPPs have made some strides in supporting teacher candidates' academic development, recommendations for further research on strategies and best practices that support the well-being of pre-service teachers in the field are crucial.

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