

The Role of the Laboratory Schools in Teacher Education

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Beliefs & Values

In response to Dean Ashby's charge to review the role of the laboratory schools in preparing teachers, a teacher education committee was created with the following members: Bob Dean, Dean's Office (Chair); Kathy Clesson, University High School; Deborah Curtis, Clinical Experiences and Certification Processes; Lori Hahm, Thomas` Metcalf School; Tom Haynes, Curriculum and Instruction; Chris Kraft, Thomas Metcalf School; Cindy Lawson, Special Education; Marilyn Moore, Curriculum and Instruction; Peggy Scott, University High School; Mike Sondgeroth, University High School; and Ronda Wilder, Thomas Metcalf School. At one of its initial meetings, the teacher education committee formulated a set of beliefs and values to guide subsequent discussions. The committee believes:

That clinical experiences must be focused on **learning** – learning as it applies to university students and faculty as well as K-12 students and faculty. To maximize learning, clinical experiences should be well defined and focused and delivered through multiple mediums, e.g., onsite, virtual, video. These experiences should be incremental – starting with structured observation and progressing to a point where students assume full responsibility for a classroom – and they should occur frequently. Teacher education students should experience all aspects of the profession, including such things as faculty meetings, curriculum renewal efforts, and co-curricular activities.

Quality experiences are what separate exemplary programs from those that are not. Quality starts with identifying and applying best practices. To monitor quality, there must be a well-defined accountability system in place that tracks multiple measures of performance. Quality must be the defining criterion for clinical experiences, not the number of hours accumulated.

Collaboration in the design, implementation, and evaluation of clinical experiences enhances quality. Respect, flexibility, and frequent communication are essential for developing and maintaining positive relationships.

A **diverse** student body and faculty enriches clinical experiences by providing opportunities to work with students and faculty with a variety of exceptionalities and those from diverse ethnic, racial, gender, and socioeconomic groups. Because schools vary by location, composition of student body, quality and number of programs offered, and type of organizational structure, it is important for future teachers to have experiences in multiple settings.

A **clear definition of roles** guides the work of those involved in providing clinical experiences. When each participant clearly understands his or her

responsibilities, there is less likelihood that precious resources will be consumed negotiating conflict.

Reflective practice is the key to continuous learning. Clinical experiences must be designed so that students and faculty have ample time to reflect on what they have observed or experienced.

The laboratory schools offer a unique setting for clinical experiences because of their location and **extended mission**. Future teachers will benefit from observing and working with practitioners who are engaged in research and service activities that are of value to the profession.

Critical Role

The committee believes that the current role of the laboratory schools in preparing teachers is a good match with the teacher education program at Illinois State University. As the second largest producer of teachers in the country, the unique niche for the teacher education program at Illinois State is preparing a large number of teachers across many academic departments and five colleges. The laboratory schools fill a critical role since they serve as field experience sites for several hundred students in a teacher education program that places a high value upon early and frequent exposure to school settings. It is this aspect of the Illinois State teacher education program that makes it so unique.

The study committee also considered the establishment of a Professional Development School (PDS) model in the laboratory schools. The study committee is not aware of any PDS model that provides the same breadth and depth of experience for so many students as what the laboratory schools currently provide. As for creating and testing a new PDS model that could be transferred to other settings, the study committee does not see this as a viable direction. Constructive change does not often occur in schools through the adoption of models, primarily because school people view their organizations as unique. It is more typical of schools to adapt good practices to create a “fit” with their particular setting. Hence, it is not likely that school personnel would adopt a model for their specific setting created by an organization that is unique in its operation, funding, facilities, scheduling, constraints, opportunities, and other factors (and that is certainly true of the laboratory schools). In addition, it must be remembered that field experience opportunities for students represent a “zero-sum game”; there are not unlimited field experiences available to Illinois State students. In considering this limitation with regard to the development and piloting of PDS models, a PDS will substantially subtract opportunities from a large number of students. With the displacement of these students, other sites and activities would have to be constructed to continue to provide these students with quality field experiences. With local schools already providing a substantial number of field experience placements, it may be likely that these schools will limit our students’ time, experiences, or both to some degree or withdraw completely. Such a scenario may be tentative, but it should certainly be considered as a major factor in developing PDS models in the laboratory schools.

Primary Concerns

Although many issues were explored and debated during committee discussions, two themes captured the committee's attention: collaboration and quality. While supportive of the general model of teacher education employed at Illinois State, committee members expressed serious concern about the quality of the field experiences and the amount of collaboration that occurs between the designers of the experiences and the practitioners who deliver the experiences. This aligns with the thinking of faculty associates in the laboratory schools who expressed concern about the lack of collaboration they observe in the design, delivery, and evaluation of field experiences. Although the amount of interaction varies from one academic department to another, faculty associate focus groups reported that they spend little time interacting with their teacher education colleagues about issues related to the clinical experiences offered in the laboratory schools. Thus, significant improvements are needed to comply with Standard I of the *Standards for Field Experiences in Teacher Education* developed by the Association of Teacher Educators. It reads:

Field experiences occur in sites characterized by school/campus collaboration where there is a commitment to simultaneous review and reform of pre K-12 and teacher education for the purpose of better serving students in the schools.

The indicator for meeting this standard provides a pretty clear picture for what this collaboration ought to look like:

The goals and mission of the teacher education program and the goals and processes of the field experiences are developed and agreed upon collaboratively by campus-based and school-based teacher educators and administrators.

Recommendations for Improving Collaboration and Quality

The study committee believes that several steps should be taken to improve the quality of the field experiences offered in the schools and the amount of collaboration that occurs between University faculty and practitioners in the field:

- Develop a standards-based, performance-driven program across all field experiences;
- Establish consistency for the goals and objectives of the field experiences attached to the same course but taught by different instructors;
- Strive for consistency in the assignment of faculty to courses offering field experiences in an effort to develop continuity in the program;
- Increase the frequency of communication between clinical instructors and cooperating field experience teachers by requiring at least two face-to-face meetings per semester;
- Establish a committee structure that will support continuous collaboration in the design, implementation, and evaluation of field experiences;
- Establish “gatekeepers” who are empowered to monitor the quality and the number of field experiences conducted in the schools;

- Require education students to enroll in an “Introduction to Education” course upon their acceptance into teacher education to increase awareness regarding the teaching profession and the role that field experiences play in future teachers’ development;
- Expand efforts to provide field experiences that give students early exposure to schools, especially at the secondary level;
- Design and schedule field experiences so that they are incremental, i.e., one block building upon another;
- Schedule a beginning of the year “event” to bring together all faculty and faculty associates involved in clinical experiences;
- Explore options for establishing a “Fellows” program in the laboratory schools – a long-term placement for a select group of teacher education students;
- Reduce the number of observation hours occurring in the laboratory schools through the use of technology, e.g., distance education technology, video streaming, and the production of specific video clips;
- Formalize expectations and arrangements for qualified faculty associates to teach university courses and for qualified university faculty to teach in the schools;
- Establish specific criteria for new hires that demonstrate an institutional emphasis on quality and collaboration, e.g., evidence of scholarship, collaborative style, and an interest in and commitment to working with schools;
- Develop a systematic process that standardizes the procedures for requesting field experience placements in the schools; include a description of the value of the field experiences for K-12 students; and
- Develop a faculty assignment and accountability system that provides faculty with rewards and accountability for their involvement in field experiences and for working with schools.

Other equally viable suggestions for improving quality and collaboration will undoubtedly surface as individual faculty members, groups of faculty, and specific governance groups like the Council for Teacher Education, begin discussing the recommendations in this report. The most effective improvements will likely flow from the discussions that occur between faculty in specific departments on campus and their colleagues in the schools. Two exemplary models of this kind of collaboration illustrate the point: (1) discussions between faculty in the Special Education Department and faculty associates at Thomas Metcalf School; and (2) discussions between Curriculum and Instruction faculty and faculty associates at University High School.

Deaf Education

The laboratory schools provide practicum experiences for three different deaf education classes. These experiences require students to do the planning and teaching of either one-on-one lessons or small-group lessons. The required classes and hours include:

1. **Teaching Language to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing–245.08:** Fifteen hours of observation followed by approximately five to seven hours of teaching. The students are in the classroom on Monday and Wednesday mornings from 8:30-11:30, and teach seven or more 30-minute lessons on Mondays and Wednesdays after observing a total of five days.

2. **Teaching Speech to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing–245.09:** Five hours of observation followed by teaching five half-hour individual speech lessons, and three or more group speech lessons.
3. **Teaching Reading and School Subjects to the Deaf–245.10:** Ten hours of teaching required with optional observations.

Metcalf faculty may have all three types of practicum students in their classrooms during one semester, or at least two. It is not uncommon to have two or more students assigned to one classroom per practicum class. Duties of the Metcalf faculty include reading lesson plans, doing written evaluations on each lesson taught, meeting with groups of students to discuss lessons, and completing final practicum evaluations.

The Metcalf faculty associates have been directly involved in planning and designing the practicum courses. This collaboration has been done in a variety of ways and has spanned over 20 years. Recently it has included, but has not been limited to:

1. Meeting as a group in the early spring of 1999 to discuss the current special education standards. Metcalf faculty attended an all-day meeting with college professors. Discussion focused on which settings the standards could best be met: In Metcalf with close supervision, any setting with deaf students, any school setting, videotaped observations, or simulation within a college classroom. The whole group discussed each standard, and we placed them in the correct setting or tabled them under “needs more definition and discussion before a decision can be made.”
2. Metcalf faculty have always participated in the interview process for deaf education tenure track professors. They have interviewed candidates and submitted recommendations for hiring.
3. When a new faculty member was hired to teach the speech practicum course in 1999, Metcalf faculty met with the deaf education department staff members to help redesign the course. It was designed with complete collaboration and agreement between the laboratory schools faculty and the special education faculty.
4. Metcalf faculty and college faculty met again in the spring of 2002 to help design the conceptual framework for SED 245.09 (Teaching Speech to Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students). This included about ten hours of meetings. Metcalf faculty were compensated for their time outside of regular school hours. Agenda items included formulating a written philosophy for the course, designing a calendar with observation and teaching dates, and creating a list of required projects for college students to complete during the practicum course.
5. Metcalf faculty and Illinois State faculty have gone to joint training seminars and then implemented the new teaching practices into both lab school curriculum and the college course content.

6. Metcalf faculty associates have helped to inservice Illinois State faculty members on various teaching techniques that they are using in their classrooms. Illinois State faculty members are teaching the adopted curriculum of the deaf education program at Metcalf in their college courses. Students are able to see what they are learning in the college classroom applied directly in a classroom of children.
7. The Metcalf deaf education teachers function as full participants in the teacher preparation program in the Department of Special Education through intensive collaboration with faculty in course development, implementation, and evaluation. No deaf education major in the Department of Special Education can graduate without the full approval of laboratory school teachers. The Metcalf deaf education faculty and Department of Special Education faculty are truly a unique team in their approach to preparing future teachers of children with hearing loss.

The Secondary Education Sequence

U-High faculty were involved in the restructuring of C&I 215 from the time the renewal efforts were first launched by Chair Rex Morrow. During the summer of 2000, efforts were focused on building a common syllabus and incorporating three sets of standards for all teachers (special education, language arts, and technology) into the curriculum. The restructuring group included faculty involved in the delivery of the course (three of whom were faculty associates) and two representatives from special education. Throughout the 2000-2001 school year, monthly meetings were held to track progress on the integration of standards and the collaborative efforts of faculty to align the sections in preparation for the next NCATE review. In the next phase of work (fall 2001), the common syllabus previously established provided a springboard for expanding the standards review to include additional state and national standards. Designing clinical experiences for the course presented a unique challenge as the school sites varied widely. A single, intensive/extensive experience could not be replicated in each setting. Discussion yielded a common description and field notes packet, with the understanding that variances are expected.

U-High faculty, under the leadership of Keystone (faculty governance group), decided to focus their efforts on improving clinical experiences during the 2001-2002 school year. A subcommittee was formed which included representatives from C&I. The aim was to identify and strengthen common elements of C&I 216 along with the clinical experiences conducted at U-High. This work began with some open dialogue between clinical instructors and U-High faculty, which helped strengthen relationships between the two groups. Next, everyone was brought up-to-date on the current status of C&I 216 and the accompanying expectations for field experiences. Syllabi were reviewed and forms were revised in an effort to design a more extensive and intensive laboratory experience. A structure was established to facilitate a continuous review of the expectations for this course. In the second semester, Ed Psych 215 faculty members were asked to join the dialogue, and students and faculty are being surveyed to provide feedback on current revisions and direction for future revisions. Results will be reviewed during the summer of 2002.

The restructuring of C&I 216 was linked to a review of the required secondary education sequence of 214, 215, and 216. The timing was ideal, coinciding with Keystone's interest in revising the field experiences connected to these courses and the hiring of new faculty in the secondary education program in the College of Education. Over the course of the year, regular meetings were held to promote collaboration. Issues addressed included the following:

- Concerns raised by the Council for Teacher Education about the structure and quality of clinical experiences associated with C&I 216 as related to the requirements of twenty-four academic departments across campus;
- Consistency of content and clinical experiences between course sections;
- Adoption of common forms and grade values for field experiences;
- Communication between and among academic departments and methods instructors involved in the secondary education sequence (as evidenced by a well-attended spring 2002 Secondary Education Conclave in Bone Student Center);
- Amendment of the course description to include laboratory hours provided through clinical experiences;
- Increased on-site involvement of instructors during clinical experiences; and
- Development of strategies for operationalizing the suggested improvements.

At the close of the spring 2002 semester, a gathering hosted in the Faculty Commons at Bone Student Center celebrated the year's accomplishments.

Conclusion

After considerable thought and discussion, the teacher education review committee strongly endorses the current role of the laboratory schools with regard to field experiences. As long as professional standards support the notion of including field experiences in the early phases of a teacher education program, the College of Education has a critical need to partner with schools that embrace this practice. Those involved in teacher education at Illinois State University recognize the reality that there are no other schools that will welcome as many teacher education students into their classrooms as the laboratory schools do.

This endorsement does not mean that the review committee simply favors maintaining a status quo approach to field experiences, for the review committee has some major concerns with the quality of the experiences currently provided in the laboratory schools and the manner in which these field experiences are designed, delivered, and evaluated. Too many students fail to see a connection between their university courses and the time they spend in K-12 classrooms. Little dialogue occurs between most university instructors and their colleagues at Metcalf and U-High. Few controls are in place to monitor the quality of the field experiences or to guarantee a carefully designed sequence of experiences. Without a standards based program, it is entirely possible for students to complete the teacher education program at Illinois State University and have an entirely different set of experiences from one another. The teacher education review committee believes that the recommendations contained within this report will strengthen field experiences by addressing many of these weaknesses.

As a work in progress, the review committee is anxious to hear reactions from colleagues across campus who are involved in teacher education. It is our hope that other helpful suggestions for improving field experiences will surface as attention is focused on this very important issue.