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Alternative Practicum Experiences for Early Childhood Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

Practicum experiences are an integral part of teacher education programs. The current study drew on perceptions of various stakeholders (preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, and university professors) to examine two practicum models of an early childhood teacher education program. The study focused on the structure of a senior-level practicum and highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of two specific models. Findings showed that both cohorts of preservice teachers experienced stress and confidence boosts during the practicum, but each cohort underwent different learning experiences due to variances in the practicum structures. Cooperating teachers and university professors preferred the new model which allowed preservice teachers to first observe the practice of experienced teachers, then learn about the theory in a classroom context, followed by practicing their own teaching in an authentic environment, and, finally, engaging in reflection and professional dialogue. Our findings may provide helpful insights for those who take part in designing practicum experiences for preservice teachers.

Key Words

Early Childhood; Teacher Preparation; Practicum Experience

New teachers generally feel unprepared for and overwhelmed by their workload as a classroom teacher, due to unrealistic views of teaching often developed during their teacher preparation program (Gold, 1996; Kane & Mallon, 2006; Meijer, De Graaf, & Meirink, 2011). In order to combat the disconnect between teacher preparation and professional practice (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Zeichner, 2010), teacher education programs strive to incorporate effective practicum experiences in addition to foundation and methods courses. Practicum experiences not only provide preservice teachers with an opportunity to put theory into practice, but they also help teachers adopt a holistic view of teaching (e.g., understand the workings of schools and classrooms, become familiar with the school environment and what it really means to be a teacher) before entering the workplace (Pierce, 2007).

In 2010, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) added a new standard, specifically addressing field experience expectations to the NAEYC Standards for Initial and Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs. This standard states that hands-on field or clinical experience is a key component of each of NAEYC's standards, and field experiences should be well planned and sequenced to prepare candidates to understand and develop the unique qualities of early childhood competencies (NAEYC, 2011). The newly published Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators further points out that field experiences in professional preparation programs play an important role in effectively preparing candidates in standards and competencies (NAEYC, 2020). In addition, participation in practicum experience is also mandated by accreditation institutions such as Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2013) and recommended by organizations such as the Institute of Medicine (IOM) & the National Research Council (NRC) (IOM & NRC, 2015). Although it may vary in intent and approach, practicum experience has

always been an integral part of preservice education for prospective teachers (Vick, 2006).

However, it is unclear what constitutes a successful practicum?

There are at least three key groups of stakeholders involved in every practicum experience: preservice teachers, cooperating teachers (classroom teachers), and university professors.

Koerner, Rust, and Baumgartner (2002) defined the role of cooperating teachers as mentors to student teachers, and they explained university professors as translators of the values and beliefs of the teacher education program. University professors support preservice teachers in developing the ability to think critically and thoughtfully, equipping them through coursework with knowledge needed for teaching, and developing shared understandings of the purposes of field experience through collaboration with cooperating teachers (Pierce, 2007). Authentic teaching experiences and appropriate support from both experienced teachers and university professors are important parts of preservice teachers' development (Busher, Gunduz, Cakmak, & Lawson, 2015; Gurvitch & Metzler, 2009). During this process, preservice teachers have a dual responsibility. On one hand, they are students learning about the teaching profession and its practice. On the other hand, they are novice professionals expected to demonstrate instructional competence to some degree (Koerner, Rust, & Baumgartner, 2002).

Changes have evolved related to practicum for teacher education over the past few decades. A century ago, as a firm believer of learning through experience, Dewey (1904) presented two models of practicums: the apprentice model and the laboratory model, which complement each other. In the apprentice model, teaching is similar to technical training where preservice teachers imitate behaviors of experienced teachers in the classroom and the responsibility for preparing preservice teachers lies mostly on the shoulders of experienced teachers. In the laboratory model, preservice teachers are guided through observation, interpretation, and classroom analyses. They

apply knowledge and theories they have learned about in academic courses within a real classroom setting.

Based on Dewey's practicum models, Zeichner (1995) identified three common approaches to practicum: the apprenticeship practicum, the applied science practicum, and the inquiry-oriented practicum. The inquiry-oriented practicum adds reflection to practicum and views teaching as a form of research with teachers as reflective practitioners. Reflection therefore becomes an important component of practicum experience as many scholars recognize its power in learning and teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006; La Paro, Van Schagen, King, & Lippard, 2018; Ritblatt, Garrity, Longstreth, Hokoda, & Potter, 2013). Now, the focus of practicum has moved away from skills acquisition toward a more explicit understanding of the processes of learning to teach. In this evolved approach, preservice teachers have opportunities to experiment with and reflect on different teaching approaches (Groundwater-Smith, Le Cornu & Ewing, 2011; Grudnoff, 2011; Hastings & Squires, 2002; Northfield & Gunstone, 1997; Zeichner, 1986). As Hiebert, Morris, Berk and Jansen (2007) pointed out, if a preparation program is serious about preparing teachers, it will help preservice teachers learn how to teach from studying teaching, and preservice teachers will be able to analyze teaching in terms of its effects on student learning.

What lies at the center of all practicum models is an intersection of theory and practice, which allows preservice teachers to develop their practical knowledge of what it means to be a teacher and to reflect on their skills and knowledge further as part of their continuing professional development (Busher, Gunduz, Cakmak & Lawson, 2015). During this process, university professors provide clear objectives for the preservice teachers through coursework and collaborate with cooperative teachers in field experience to help preservice teachers develop

competencies. In addition to the different theoretical frameworks of practicums, the structure of the practicum experience also varies from one university to another and affects teachers and students in different ways. NAEYC (2011) standards suggest field experience include a PreK-3rd grade setting for seven weeks, but universities meet this recommendation in a variety of ways.

In the current study, we are focusing on two practicum models with different structures but the same intentionality of bridging theory to practice and preparing reflective practitioners. Research on practicum experience has mainly focus on preservice teachers' thoughts and experiences during practicum, with less attention being paid to investigate the perspectives of cooperating teachers or university professors (Lawson, Cakmak, Gunduz, & Busher, 2015). To provide a holistic view of the practicum experience, we will draw on perceptions of all the main stakeholders of an early childhood practicum experience including cooperating teachers, preservice teachers, and professors at a southeastern university to compare two structures of practicum models. The study will help us further understand how the structure (not necessarily the content) of a practicum might support or hinder the learning experience for preservice teachers.

Methods

In this study, we used a qualitative approach to examine and understand two models of a senior level undergraduate practicum for early childhood education from the perspectives of different stakeholders. The goal was to first understand the experiences of stakeholders within each model and then to determine which model better met each stakeholder's needs. The study was guided by the following questions: 1) How does each model of practicum benefit stakeholders?, 2) What are the weaknesses of each model?, and 3) What structural characteristics of practicum best support preservice teachers?

Participants

The participants in this study included senior-level undergraduate students in early childhood education at a large public university in southeastern United States ($n = 35$). The undergraduate students in this cohort attended school full-time and were enrolled in 16-18 hours of coursework during the semester. Prior to their senior year, participants had a variety of practicum experiences, including a year-long placement in a Head Start setting, a semester placement in an infant/toddler setting, and a semester placement in a public four-year-old kindergarten (4K) setting. Placements settings for senior practicum (the focus of this study) in rural to urban areas, with a focus for placement based on school characteristics such as Title I status, magnet-focus, and demographic make-up of the student population. Study participants also included four cooperating teachers from public schools in the surrounding areas (within an hour drive of the university) and two professors in early childhood education at the university who worked with student participants during their practicum in concurrent methods courses on early mathematics and early literacy. The cooperating teachers ranged in experience from five to over twenty years working in an early childhood setting. These teachers were chosen because they had participated in both models of practicum and had at least two year of experience as a mentor teacher for the university. The professors of focus had between seven and nine years of experience (at the time of this study) as the teacher educators for methods courses at this university. They were both tenured faculty at the Associate level at a research-focused institution. Prior to their work at the university setting, both professors taught in early childhood settings. Preservice teachers participated in one of the two practicum models while cooperating teachers and university professors experienced both models (described below) and were able to make comparisons.

Practicum Models

Each of the practicum models described in this study took place during the fall semester of the preservice teachers' senior year, just prior to student teaching. Practicum Model 1 took place in the fall of 2016 and practicum Model 2 took place in the fall of 2017. While these students took part in other practicum experiences in their sophomore and junior years, this senior-level practicum was explicitly tied to the methods coursework they were taking. Assignments given in methods courses were implemented into practice in their respective practicum settings for both practicum models. In each practicum model, students were assigned a classroom setting that ranged from four-year-old kindergarten through third grade for the duration of the semester. While the focus of each model remained the same (emphasis on connecting theory to practice and building reflective practitioners), the structural components of the two models were modified.

In practicum Model 1 (see Table 1), students began the semester on the normal start date for all university students. They attended two 3-hour methods courses two days per week (Tuesdays and Thursdays), engaged in field placements two days per week for six hours (Mondays and Wednesdays), and attended a course-based seminar focused on reflective practice one day per week (Fridays) for three hours during the 15-week semester (from mid-August to mid-June).

In practicum Model 2 (see Table 2), students began the semester two days earlier than all other university students, so they were able to attend the first day of school in their respective practicum settings. This choice was intentional, particularly for early childhood preservice teachers, so they were able to experience how cooperating teachers established classroom norms and routines in the beginning of the school year. The preservice teachers participated in one introductory course session followed by two weeks of continuous field placements for six hours

per day. After this initial two-week period, students attended two 3-hour courses each day for four days per week (Monday-Thursday) and one 3-hour seminar each Friday for six weeks. Following this six-week course session, students went back to their practicum placements for an uninterrupted period of six weeks with continued seminars on Fridays. No additional coursework was assigned during this six-week period, but students were expected to carry out lessons which were designed during previous course sessions. The final two weeks of the semester included four days per week of course sessions to reflect on field placements and conduct final exams.

In both models, students were expected to enact tasks/projects assigned in their courses while in their practicum classrooms. The project requirements were identical for each model, with the only variation being the structure of implementation with practicum. For example, in Model 1, a short unit would take longer to implement (around two weeks) because of the concurrent coursework in between field visits. Whereas in Model 2, the same project might be implemented within a single week because there were no course meetings during field visits. These tasks/projects were designed by the preservice teachers and they received multiple rounds of feedback from instructors to revise plans before implementing these in their practicum settings. For example, students were expected to teach a short mathematics unit, which focused on reflective teaching practices, as a requirement for their early childhood mathematics course and they were expected to teach four 10-15 minute interactive writing lessons as a requirement for their language arts course. The final exams were identical in both models and were designed to assess preservice teachers' understanding of key concepts and strategies taught during course meetings. Reflection activities were also designed to help both groups of students analyze their practicum experiences and how they related to content learned throughout the semester.

<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>

<INSERT TABLE 2 HERE>

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection focused on qualitative approaches such as individual interviews and collective focus groups, in addition to an electronic Likert and open-ended survey given to cooperating teachers. These methods are described in more detail below.

Focus Group with Preservice Teachers. After completion of the fall practicum, we conducted focus groups (one in December of 2016 and 2017) with the each cohort of preservice teachers using prompts such as the following: 1) How have your attitudes towards teaching changed as a result of coursework and/or field experience?, 2) How confident and prepared do you feel about student teaching after the practicum experience?, 3) How confident and prepared do you feel about the instructional methods in different content areas?, 4) What is your reflection on the structure of the practicum?, and 5) What has been your stress level throughout the semester?

Online Survey with Cooperating Teachers. In addition to the focus groups with preservice teachers, we asked four cooperating teachers who had experience with both models to complete an online survey to share their opinions on the two models. Survey questions included: 1) Which structure did you like better as cooperating teacher, and why?, and 2) Which structure do you feel was most beneficial for our Early Childhood Education practicum students, and why?

Interviews with University Professors. To better understand the rationale behind practicum design and compare the two models, we also interviewed two professors at the university who took part in designing the two practicum models and teaching academic courses. Participants were prompted by the following questions: 1) Why did you change the structure of the practicum?, 2) Which structure did you like better and why?, 3) Which structure do you feel was

most beneficial to the preservice teachers and why?, and 4) Is there anything you would change to the current practicum structure?

Focus groups and interviews were transcribed and the research team engaged in repetitive readings of all data. Utilizing all of the data sources, we analyzed and coded the data through a thematic analysis where the research team individually read each data source underlining and assigning each phrase and sentence with an initial theme. After individual initial coding, we shared findings, discussed discrepancies, and came to a consensus. As a second layer of analysis, we looked for patterns within the initial themes by categorizing phrases and sentences together with their respective themes (Saldaña, 2014).

Findings

Stress Level during Practicum

Both cohorts mentioned experiencing stress during the practicum, but the stress reportedly came from different sources. Preservice teachers who participated in practicum Model 1 gave mixed feedback regarding moving back and forth between their field placement and taking classes. Some felt a high level of stress throughout the semester due to the role switching. As some participants responded, “I think it is overwhelming and I don’t know that there’s any way to take away the overwhelming-ness of trying to wear the hat of teacher and the hat of student. I just think that’s always going to be a little bit difficult.”. Another participant stated “It was pretty overwhelming, I thought...it was two different energy levels, but I had to be at 100 on both. So while I wasn’t talking and crawling around on the floor and running around when we were in class, I was still trying to take in stuff and have meaningful discussions.”

On the other hand, some preservice teachers in Model 1 brought up that the switching between coursework and being with children each week allowed them to take a “break”. One participant commented:

Our class days were just really long days...so it was nice that the next day we would be with the kids...it was easier to do my assignments on those days, because after the long days of class, the last thing I really wanted to do was all of the reading and writing that we had to do.

Another participant said:

I think the transition was good in that we got to be like half-time, part-time student teachers...going to student teaching, going to class takes two different energy levels in just like two very different settings, so it's good to go half the time but have that other day to learn, and still reflect on your teaching.

The stress for preservice teachers in Model 2 came from the 6-week period of coursework. A semester-long course was condensed to six weeks which was intense and stressful for some.

Some responses from the focus group demonstrated:

It was tough. It was just a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot of reading. And it was hard just to make sure you were getting it in all in. Making sure it was for the course you were in, when you were in there talking, you had to make sure you were talking about the right reading...I understand that it was a lot because it had to be condensed down so that we could have that six weeks of experience. It was definitely doable, but it was just...a lot of stress.

Another participant responded:

Six weeks, stressful. Very stressful...I wanna make sure that I know what I'm going to be able to talk about when I go into class and...not getting to every reading made me really stressed and anxious to go into that classroom and not be able to talk about it because I didn't

get to reading it. So then I'd be like trying to skim over it really fast and just had high anxiety for me for that whole six weeks. And then, like literally, once you walked out of that class on the last Thursday, it was nothing. I felt nothing but happy feelings that next six weeks.

From interviews with two professors, we found that the professors also recognized the stress that some preservice teachers were experiencing during Model 1, which was one of the reasons that led to the change in practicum structure. Model 1 was used for many years, and there had been consistent complaints from preservice teachers about balancing coursework with their field placement. From the professors' viewpoints, going back and forth between university courses and the field was extremely stressful and hard to manage for students. As one professor pointed out:

One thing we noticed when students were going back and forth was that they seemed extremely stressed because they were balancing reading and doing homework assignments at night and being in school for the entire next day, feeling like they want to do things for their field placement as well as their homework. The back and forth nature seemed to be a lot for them to manage.

The other professor also commented: "...it was too hectic and there was not enough transition time between going from coursework to the practicum classroom and then back again. They didn't have enough time to do their work or to fully reflect on it."

Both professors expressed their preference for the new structure of practicum because it removed student complaints about wearing multiple hats—teacher hat and student hat at the same time and generated better student outcomes. As one professor mentioned in the interview:

[Model 2] is more condensed, so I feel like they are really taking in the content at a deeper level...Overall, they seem less stressed, even though it's a little bit more reading and more

content knowledge covered. They are used to that. They are used to studying each night...but they are not used to the going back and forth like they did before, so they are more comfortable doing this student role...I think they enjoyed having one routine at the beginning of the semester which is going to class every day, and then one routine of going to school every day at the end of the semester.

Authenticity of the Learning Experience

The qualitative data revealed a consensus among professors and cooperating teachers that the structure of Model 2 provided a more authentic and focused experience for preservice teachers. From the professors' perspectives, its extended 6-week field experience allowed preservice teachers to deliver instructional practices in a more authentic way when compared to the segmented lessons in Model 1. As one professor said:

[In Model 1] for my writing lessons, I wanted them to teach four consecutive days. They could never do these kinds of consecutive assignments because they were only there on certain days of the week ... every other day...[In Model 2] they can actually do this over four days and practice what it's like to teach writing every day where it builds on one writing lesson to the next...This feels more natural that they are teaching the way they are preparing to teach in the future.

The other professor also commented:

I ask them to teach back-to-back lessons and build in student assessment pieces into planning, so they have to assess, plan, teach, and then they have to plan again and reflect, and that takes a long time...if you are in practicum only two days a week, that's across about three weeks, whereas if you are in there for six weeks straight, that's a week. So, you are

getting it done in real time and you are able to actually implement a unit in the way that it was supposed to be implemented in a regular school year.

Similar opinions regarding the authentic classroom experience in Model 2 were found in cooperating teacher survey responses. From the cooperating teachers' perspectives, Model 2 was more consistent and provided more opportunities for preservice teachers to get involved and take responsibility in the classroom. As one cooperating teacher responded:

The student teacher was able to witness and be a part of the start of the school year...and being in class every day gave the student teacher a clear view of how the class runs continuously. Coming only two days a week gives a snapshot of the class...consistently being in the classroom every day for six weeks better prepares them for their student teaching.

Another cooperating teacher also wrote:

I was able to explain my teaching style and classroom rules and procedures. Being in the class continually for six weeks, the practicum student was able to be a part of our class and contribute to the class...she was a vital part of our class.

Many preservice teachers in Model 2 also recognized the benefits of being in the field continuously for 6 weeks. They were able to fully invest in teaching and build stronger relationships with both cooperating teachers and students. As one participant responded:

...you didn't have to come home after teaching all day and worry about readings and homework for the next day. You were on your own schedule, when you wanted to teach your lessons, when you wanted to plan your lessons, and I think it was just very beneficial to be able to just be focused in on your practicum and actually take it all in. And I learned so much more than I think I would have if I had just been going on Tuesday, Thursday.

Another participant also said:

I think being there every day, we got to really know the teachers better and become more comfortable. I know I went into my second-grade classroom of a friend and asked if I could borrow stuff. And I don't know if I would have felt comfortable enough to be doing that if I wasn't there every day and building that relationship. So using other teachers as tools for me was super helpful, and I don't think I would have felt as comfortable had I not been there every day.

Instead of only seeing pieces of a classroom, they had the opportunity to get a holistic view of things that happened in the classroom. This holistic view allowed preservice teachers to engage in the reflective practice that was the overarching goal of the practicum experience. It allowed them to see student progressions in terms of learning and social emotional growth and how the classroom teacher supports these progressions over time. As a preservice teacher commented:

...being there [in the field] every day you just see kinda how the teachers structure the whole week. So you know they introduce something on Monday and then you see how they build upon that throughout the week. And then you're just a part of that whole process and you get to see all of that as opposed to seeing just snippets of a unit or something like that.

Being able to immerse in the field experience for an extended period of time provided preservice teachers with a more authentic learning environment. They could experience what it felt like to be in the classroom and with students from Monday to Friday like a real teacher, which is important for preparing themselves for future teaching.

Bridging Theory and Practice

Many preservice teachers in Model 1 expressed that the structure of going back and forth between field placement and academic courses gave them the opportunity to make connections between what they were learning in class and what was happening in the field immediately. They were able to talk to their cooperating teachers and get immediate feedback from professors. One participant responded:

I really did appreciate going back and forth, it made it easy to have a question in your class one day and come back and ask your teacher or learn something in your class one day and just go and do it the next day, that was really nice.

Another also said: “I like the back and forth. You are actually seeing it as you’re learning about it and I think that’s really beneficial. It would be hard just going there every day and not being able to talk to teachers and just get professors feedback on stuff.”

However, from interviews with professors, we found that the practicum structure was changed with the intention to allow students to have more understanding of the content knowledge before entering the field so that they could better apply theory to practice. As one professor mentioned,

Looking at their quality of work in that approach [Model 1], it didn’t seem like they were really applying a lot of what we were saying in the methods courses to the practicum, so there was less of a connection between theory and practice than we would like to see...this approach [Model 2] gives them a chance to really immerse in the coursework and apply the theories they are learning to an extended practicum, so they are able to...apply what they know in a more effective way.

The other professor also shared a similar opinion:

We thought doing the content in the beginning part of the semester and getting all that content covered, that when they went to the classrooms, they would have a much better understanding of the content knowledge that we wanted them to observe, practice and do...

Although professors and many preservice teachers in Model 1 had differing opinions on whether the structure of going back and forth between courses and placements was beneficial, it is also apparent that they all considered being able to connect the content learned from coursework to real teaching practices in the field a vital part of the practicum experience. It is important to note that Model 2 preservice teachers did not express any inability to connect theory to practice with the revised model. In both models, preservice teachers were able to discuss how they bridged theory and practice; however, university professors saw distinct differences in the quality of work depending on the model of practicum.

Increased Confidence in Teaching

Analyses of focus group interviews indicated that both cohorts of preservice teachers felt more confident and more prepared because of the coursework and field experience despite the different practicum structures. Participants in the first model expressed, "It definitely made me more confident...and hopeful like, 'oh, I can do this'. I think just having that field experience...having the time to actually practice the strategies we've been learning about for three years now has helped so much." Another commented,

I feel more prepared with having the tools, and from our coursework and everything. Just having those things, and feeling comfortable, knowing how to use them, and being able to test them out in a not-so-high-stress situation was great for me.

Preservice teachers in the second model also shared a similar confidence boost due to the practicum experience,

...you were there so consistently you knew all about the school in general and how the administration works and how that school works. Student teaching in the same school...you are very familiar with the school and the people there. It made me a lot more confident.

Another participant in Model 2 said:

We have to teach a lesson for every class and some of them were lessons that built on each other...talking about those things in class and then being able to actually do them in the placement made me more confident for next semester in teaching and planning.

When asking about their opinions on the other practicum model, both cohorts felt their practicum structure is better in terms of preparing them for teaching and building confidence.

One participant from Model 1 stated:

This is kind of unfortunate that the practicum structure is changing. I wouldn't change the structure. I feel bad for the girls next semester...they are going to miss a big part of gaining your confidence...things going well and not going well and immediately having a time to discuss or [get] the support...Think about all five of these classes and the information...that sounds super unmanageable.

Another participant also commented: "They are not going to benefit from the discussions that we had, from being in placements and then coming to class. They are not going to remember everything that they wanted to talk about when they come back to reflect."

Regardless of the different structures, it is certain, based on this data, that practicum provided valuable and effective experience for preservice teachers in terms of preparing for their future

teaching. Engaging in practicum could help preservice teachers gain confidence as they made the transition from student to teacher.

Gaps between Coursework and Field Experience

Both cohorts discussed some gaps between their academic courses and field experience. Some preservice teachers pointed out that some of the assignments and readings did not apply to the schools they were placed. Others suggested that it would be more beneficial if the “exams” could focus more on reflections of their teaching instead of the readings. As one participant said during focus group, “It was super stressful, I think the stress could definitely be minimized by eliminating the assignments that didn’t apply to our schools and especially the reading, we had so much reading.” Another participant continued:

...I don’t know if we are required to have exams, but maybe make it more reflective of teaching. Cause I agree it was really hard but maybe instead of it being exams on everything we learned this semester, make it more reflective of what we actually saw in the classroom... from what we learned.

The alignment between coursework and field experience is important for preservice teachers. It would be ideal if their practicum experience could be individualized to meet the specific needs of each individual placement. However, when this is not realistic in many settings, providing ample opportunities for reflection could be the key to help bridge the gap and make practicum experience more beneficial and personalized for preservice teachers.

Discussion

Our study compared two practicum models for an early childhood teacher preparation program from the perspectives of various stakeholders including preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, and university professors. Although the structure of the practicum at this university

changed, the goal stayed the same, which, as one professor stated, was “for preservice teachers to be able to see what’s happening at those grade levels and apply from the methods courses what they’ve learned in terms of best practice.” Darling-Hammond (2006) noted that one of the most powerful and effective ways of supporting student teachers is to link constructed practicum experience with on-campus courses. Both models were deliberately designed to connect field experiences with coursework and equip preservice teachers with the knowledge and skills they need for teaching. As results from preservice teacher focus groups showed, both cohorts were more confident and prepared after the practicum experience.

A practicum experience typically involves at least three stakeholders: preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, and university personnel. Preservice teachers are at the center of this relationship, as the main purpose of the practicum is to prepare them for classroom practice. Both cooperating teachers and university professors are there in a supportive role. However, in this study, both cohorts experienced a unique practicum. Without experiencing the other practicum model, their comments and opinions about the other were based only on personal understandings and assumptions. This is why viewpoints from cooperating teachers and professors (who have experience in both) are helpful in gaining a more thorough insight into the strengths and weakness of the two practicum models. As Zeichner notes, “A perennial problem in traditional college- and university sponsored teacher education programs has been the lack of connection between campus-based, university-based teacher education courses and field experiences (2010, p. 91). By collecting data from cooperating teachers and university professors, we are better able to create experiences that connect theory to practice in a beneficial way for preservice early childhood teachers and for the other stakeholders involved in the process.

It is apparent from survey results that cooperating teachers favored Model 2 over Model 1 as it was more consistent, and the preservice teachers became a valued part of the teaching team in the classroom. Cooperating teachers believed that preservice teachers would benefit more from Model 2 because they got to see the holistic view of the classroom and developed a more realistic view of teaching. In Model 2, cooperating teachers were able to push preservice teachers beyond a focus on procedures and management because of their extended time together. Moore (2003) described the downfall of practicum experiences as focusing on procedural concerns rather than instructional practice. While more research is needed, findings from this study indicate that extended models could support more reflective practice in preservice education.

Similar to the cooperating teachers, both professors also liked the new structure better for several reasons. For instance, preservice teachers were able to teach consecutive lessons, as would be expected in a classroom setting, during the continuous six weeks of field placement and the overall quality of student work improved. While reflective practice is a critical component of most teacher preparation programs, reflective practice in higher education is not as prevalent (Hubball, Collins, & Pratt, 2005). This use of reflection in designing semester-long experiences is critical to ensure successful theory to practice transitions.

While the professors in this study saw benefits to Model 2, they also recognized limitations and worked to address them in future iterations to remove some of the concerns of preservice teachers. For example, to increase connections, a Friday field placement was added to the new structure so that preservice teachers are not completely absent from the classroom during the six weeks of coursework. As one professor pointed out, “We noticed with the new structure that the downside was [preservice teachers] went out for the first two weeks of school, but then they didn’t see the kids for six weeks...they would come back in and the students didn’t remember

them, and didn't have a relationship with them and they had also missed a whole chunk of development from those first week to six weeks later. So what we've done now is added that they go in every Friday even when they are in the six weeks of classes, they still go into their placement every Friday...so they keep a connection with the kids and they see the continuous progress and development at least on a weekly basis.”

To continually improve the model, university professors are now engaging in curriculum mapping for the six weeks of coursework to ensure that students are not overloaded with readings and assignments and that there is a clear progression of content that is integrated across methods coursework. While the comments from preservice teachers related to an overabundance of reading may be related to external factors (e.g. students having to work after class or extracurricular commitments) it was clear that preservice teachers were not assimilating the readings in an effective manner. To that end, the university professors are engaging in collaborative planning during meetings to ensure all content is covered while removing superfluous work when necessary.

Many scholars place great emphasis on the role of reflection in teacher preparation and teacher professional development, believing that reflection is an essential component for understanding the complex nature of teaching (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Freese, 1999; Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; Schon, 1987; Smith & Lev-Ari, 2005; Zeichner, 1996; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Both practicum models in our study have carefully built in reflection opportunities for preservice teachers, but the new structure creates a more authentic teaching experience for preservice teachers, allowing them to be in the classroom with students continuously as they will be in the future. Further, similarly to Zeichner's (2010) work, we noted that the overall process of examining practicum models provides increased opportunities for reflection and collaboration

between cooperating teachers and university professors to alleviate disconnections between coursework and field experiences. In fact, perhaps the most important outcome of this work is the relationship building among faculty and between faculty and cooperating teachers that was necessary to fully support preservice teachers. This interrelationship is captured below in Figure 1.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

Taking all perspectives into account, we believe that Model 2 is worth exploring further as we continue to strive to connect theory and practice in our teacher preparation program. The model combines the apprenticeship approach, the applied science approach, and the inquiry-oriented approach (Zeichner, 1995). With support from university professors and cooperating teachers, preservice teachers first observe practice of experienced teachers, then learn about the theory, practice their own teaching in an authentic environment, and engage in reflection and professional dialogue based on their knowledge and classroom experience.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study focused on comparing two different practicum models to inform other teacher preparation programs of their strengths and weaknesses. However, the generalizability is limited by the small sample size. Additionally, preservice teacher participants were from two different cohorts, so they only participated in one of the two practicum models, which made comparisons of their experiences difficult. To alleviate potential bias from preservice teachers, we sought out perspectives from cooperating teachers and university professors who have experience with both models.

Despite the limitations, findings highlighted different stakeholders' beliefs related to these practicum experiences. Further work in this area could examine the overall impact of these two

models on preservice teachers' instructional practices to determine if any differences in quality occur. In addition, future work could examine how these different experiences influence preservice teachers as they transition to student teaching and their first year of classroom teaching.

Our transition to the new model came from an assessment of needs of our preservice teachers, but our goal is not to convince other institutions to implement one model over another. We believe our results provide some useful information and insights to those who take part in designing practicum experiences for preservice teachers in terms of characteristics of a successful practicum. In particular, looking beyond student data and examining the beliefs of university faculty and cooperating teachers can support a systematic environment with the preservice teacher at the center and reflection from all stakeholders as a critical component to success.

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