

MANAGING THE FIELD EXPERIENCE IN DISTANCE DELIVERED TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

MARY SIMPSON
Massey University
New Zealand

Email: m.g.simpson@massey.ac.nz

ABSTRACT

Field experience is a core element in a pre-service teacher education programme. It allows students to enact, and reflect on, their developing philosophies of teaching and is the 'testing ground' for theory/practice links. Educational theorists and programme planners in distance delivered teacher education programmes acknowledge the centrality of field experience. Yet for distance education students that experience is often minimized because of delivery costs and a range of supervision and programme factors. For distance students it is essential that their field experience is of comparable quality and rigor to that of their on-campus counterparts so that a distance gained teaching qualification meets the same standards as one gained on-campus. This paper explores some of the ways field experience can be implemented in a distance delivered teacher education programme. Special emphasis is placed on how quality field experience in distance delivered teacher education programmes can ensure that students receive equitable opportunities and have successful experiences. It draws on an international comparative study of distance delivered pre-service teacher education and examples provided reflect the diversity of settings in which pre-service teacher education is undertaken. Particular reference is made to a New Zealand programme that has employed print, video, telephone and CMC as well as the more traditional and costly personal visits of teacher experts in the preparation and supervision phases of field experience.

Introduction

This paper discusses the provision of field experience for student teachers who are in distance delivered teacher education programmes where the students are working towards a first level teacher education qualification. The contexts drawn on for the discussion in this paper are spread throughout the world, in developed and developing countries and in a variety of organizations. The experience and enactment of field experience is thus quite varied. The developmental stage of the country often determines the categorization of the field experience as pre-service or in-service. In many developing countries, particularly where universal education has been introduced, the supply of teachers is often insufficient. In such circumstances student teachers often work in schools as teachers while they undertake their teacher education programme. For these students field experience becomes an in-service provision largely reflecting the apprenticeship model. Generally, however, field experience is categorized and written of in the literature as a pre-service experience and its emphasis is towards the reflective constructivist approach.

Whether in-service or pre-service and whatever the theoretical approach the provision and support of field experience provides a particular challenge for distance delivered teacher education programmes. In traditional on-campus initial teacher education programmes lecturers (or faculty) work with their students to prepare them for field experience and often supervise them while in the field. Such preparation and support is more challenging to provide for distance students.

The nature of field experience

There seems to be no disagreement in the teacher education literature that field experience is important. In fact there is a call from many researchers and writers for greater links with schools (Howey, 1996; Imig & Switzer, 1996; Ishler, Edens, & Berry, 1996; Khamis, 2000; Perraton, 2000; Walker, Preston, & Mitchell, 2000). These links already take many forms – partnerships, laboratory schools, Normal Schools and professional development schools. However, at present, the most widely used link is individual schools that are contracted to provide field experience. It is probable that new hybrid models will emerge in response to distance delivered teacher education.

Field experience, which should provide the testing or proving context for the theoretical and curriculum courses in a programme, is currently enacted in many forms. Examples of these forms are block postings, microteaching and observations. Usually, students move progressively, and with support, from structured observations to work with individual pupils to group and whole class work (McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996; Morine-Dershimer & Leighfield, 1995).

One of the outcomes sought from field experience is the development of a sense of being part of a community and a profession. It is important for pre-service students to feel supported as they begin to develop a sense of belonging to a teaching and learning community (Edens, 2000; Howey, 1996; Ishler et al., 1996). Support comes from work with teachers in the field, contact with peers and supervision from lecturers or other teacher education experts.

Field experience ideally should not only be about testing or solving immediate problems and allowing the development of teaching skills but also about learning to enquire and reflect (McIntyre et al., 1996; Morine-Dershimer & Leighfield, 1995).

There is a strong call in the teacher education literature for student teachers to develop reflection skills and habits. Ishler et al. (1996) say that teacher education programmes should encourage reflective analysis. Roth (1999) also notes the importance of critical reflection. Howey (1996, p. 145) suggests that teacher education preparation is not so much about knowledge bases but “how curriculum is represented to and engaged in by prospective teachers in pedagogically powerful ways, that is, in contexts that are, in fact, conducive to learning to teach.” Student teachers need opportunities to extend their perspectives beyond single classrooms and to learn to reflect and critique the relationships of power and influence that shape classrooms and the ways schools operate (Graves, 1990; Hursh, 1995; Ishler et al., 1996; Roth, 1999; Simco, 1998). Hursh (1995) agrees when he states the reflection and critique must work to uncover relationships of power and influence and encourage new ways of teaching and organizing schools. Swanwick (1990) says the profession as a whole will suffer if critical reflection, self-evaluation and the extension of perspectives beyond a single classroom are not developed.

Field experience varies in the timing and frequency of the in-school experiences. The most common patterns try to spread the experiences throughout the programme. There is also variation in the range and number of schools used (McIntyre et al., 1996; Morine-Dershimer & Leighfield, 1995). These variations reflect theoretical orientations and national conditions.

The supervision, which occurs during field experience, also reflects theoretical and practical conditions. During supervision both the associate (also known as the cooperating) teacher and the lecturer or institution representative supervise the student and are important to the success the student experiences (Cooper, 1995). Their roles, although played differently, are evaluative and supportive in nature.

This understanding of the nature of field experience provides the context for identifying the problems of providing field experience by distance education.

The problems of providing field experience by distance education

The provision of field experience in distance delivered teacher education programmes presents a range of problems. Some problems are of an administrative nature, others are related to ensuring that the content elements that writers and researchers have identified as central to a quality programme of teacher education are included for distance students.

Central to encouraging student teachers to develop reflective practice and communicate with others as they do this is providing a range of school experiences. This helps student teachers to develop multiple perspectives and note the variety of responses there can be to common problems and issues. However, conversely, providing dialogue and shared experiences is also difficult with multiple field sites, as the means of allowing the dialogue to occur may not be readily available. A further issue related to providing a range of experience was noted by Young (1998) who noted that a consequence of many of the new shortened programmes and the school-based programmes was that experience is often in a single school and can be an inadequate model for a future teacher.

It is also often the case that it is difficult for a teacher education institution to find sufficient schools in which to place their students. Quantity is one problem, quality is another. Ishler and Howey (1996; 1996) noted that in general, institutions delivering teacher education have little ability to select and supervise sites of best practice, as they are limited to the use of local schools or schools within a reasonable travelling distance. Robinson (1997) identified further problems saying that

consistency of quality in field experience is not easy to achieve for widely geographically spread students and that there is the challenge of understanding local school conditions and being responsive from a centralized point of control.

Supervision of student teachers while on field experience raises a number of problems. Ideally, supervision needs to be provided by people who are familiar with the teacher education programme and can help student teachers make the links between their coursework and the field experience. However, when the school the student teacher is placed at is far from the campus this ideal can be difficult to achieve. It may be impossible to release the lecturer from other teaching duties in order to visit the students who are on field experience. Cost is also a consideration. Travel is expensive. The three party (student, associate teacher and lecturer) relationship is prone to the development of conflicting values and unclear communication of requirements (Cooper, 1995).

Circumstances, such as the distance student teachers are from the institution, the number of student teachers to be visited, the costs, or a combination of these factors sometimes make it impossible for the lecturers to visit the students. There are also some teacher education institutions that do not have their lecturers visit the students. In any of these circumstances the selection of other personnel with sufficient expertise and knowledge of the particular teacher education programme becomes an issue. These people have to have credibility with the students, the schools and the associate teachers. It is during the supervision of student teachers on field experience that what Darling-Hammond (1999) Berliner, (2000) Goodlad (1999) and Ishler (1996) call the intricately interwoven links with field experience and schools come most closely into play. However, these links are always vulnerable to being weakened. When teachers are unclear about the field experience requirements

for example, it is valuable to have lecturers from the institution in the school to be able to collaborate in order to provide clarity. Students like this collaboration as well. For them it can also provide clarification if needed. Collaboration also serves to maintain clear understanding of the value of their programme with people who may well be their future employers. It is the case that where there are many providers of teacher education there can be competition for the use of schools. Under such pressure the school/institutional links are especially vulnerable to the effects of misunderstanding.

Associate or cooperating teachers generally take on the role of mentoring and supporting student teachers from a sense of commitment to their profession rather than of commitment to any institution or for the remuneration provided (Cooper, 1995). However, support programmes for the associate teacher can mean they develop programme expertise particularly related to one institution. In other cases contractual arrangements are made, such as the partnership schools and mentor teacher arrangements developed by the British Open University (Bourdillon & Burgess, 1998). Such arrangements usually require the school or the associate teacher to work exclusively with the contracted institution and thus close that link for other institutions and their students.

Associate teachers need special preparation for their role so that the experience they provide links with the programme goals (Morine-Dersheimer & Leighfield, 1995). Training of associate teachers at a distance means the development of special training packages and allocation of time for all the parties involved.

Decisions on the timing of field experience in the programme and the nature of each placement brings further issues to be addressed. The balance of when students can be away from the institution and how that impacts on lecturers'

commitments to other areas of the programme, timetables of schools and institutions are complex to weigh against placing the field experience at times in the programme when learning will be maximized.

There are other field experience issues that relate to the nature of the experience student teachers are provided with. The literature also highlighted the need there can be for specialized field experience. Multi-level teaching experience for rural school situations was indicated as a neglected focus (Beckner, 1996). Likewise, inner city schools pose another set of practice challenges. Haberman, quoted in Dill, talks of the need to work with “children in poverty” (Dill, 1996, p. 952). The need to address and understand multi-cultural populations and to prepare a rather homogenous teaching force for diverse classrooms was identified (Duhon, Peoples, & Page, 1996; Howard & del Rosario, 2000; Nieto, 2000; Walker et al., 2000). Howey (1996, p. 163) supported this need for special preparation by indicating that he saw students needing “the understandings, abilities and dispositions to understand and celebrate individual and cultural diversity.” Iredale (1993) noted that in many developing countries pre-service teacher education is based on urban assumptions. It may be necessary he says to include rural teaching practice. It also should be noted that for many teacher education students, especially in Africa, their first language is not the language of instruction (Iredale, 1993).

The next section of this paper will examine a range of responses to the issues that have been identified. Although the teacher education literature showed consistency about the problems and issues that underpin field experience the complex relationship of all the parties to field experience means that some of the issues will always be dynamic. The contexts and theoretical frameworks also shape the responses. Developing countries, for example, are rarely able to afford programmes

of the complexity and depth that is possible in developed countries. Given these complexities the responses that are discussed in the following section are generally designed to ameliorate rather than solve. It is unlikely that a perfect solution that suits any or all contexts is possible. However, good practice can inform the actions of others.

Models and methods for providing and supporting field experience

The literature on distance education and field experience is sparse. Of the little that is available most focuses on the actual field experience time. There is very little that acknowledges the management or preparation issues associated with the field experience. However, the literature on the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) to support on-campus students during field experience provides some relevant information. In some ways once teacher education students go on field experience to any schools away from the immediate location of the teacher education institution some of the field experience problems already outlined become common to on-campus and distance students.

A number of distance delivered pre-service teacher education programmes overcome some of the challenges of distant preparation by including blocks of residential time to allow students to prepare for field experience (Hall, 1998) and establishing base schools for use during some of the field experience (Campbell, Yates, & McGee, 1998). Waikato University in New Zealand with the Mixed Media Programme and The Open University in England with a Post Graduate programme both use base schools and ensure that students have ongoing, activity focused contact with the base schools. These responses, however, really only work in situations of reasonable affluence and mobility. In some countries students do not have access to

either private or public transport. Such difficulties can only really be overcome by using local experts to provide supervision and support. However, when the students are in-service students the use of residential time for work on refining teaching skills may have some benefit as these students can apply their learning immediately on their return to schools. In Somalia (Said, 1990) the residential time and the support it provides seems to have allowed a teacher education programme to continue under extremely difficult refugee camp conditions.

In another New Zealand programme from Massey University the programme planners developed the programme so no on-campus or regional workshop time was required. This decision recognized the cost of travel and accommodation to students. It also reflected the institutional history of distance delivery as the University has expertise in delivering practical subjects at a distance. The field experience preparation is provided by the traditional print material and use of online group and class work. Support during field experience is commented on later in this paper (Anderson & Simpson, 1998, 2002; Simpson, 2002).

Acknowledging reflective practice as such an essential part of field experience means that supporting this aspect of the programme at a distance needs serious consideration and commitment. Ideally, students and lecturers need ways of communicating with one another and being able to discuss the situations they see. Often, as in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, this is achieved by placing several students in one school, having them teach in front of one another with lecturers or other education experts present and then conducting a follow-up discussion time (Chale, 1993; Chivore, 1993). The British Open University provides an example of how, in another setting, mentor teachers are supported through teacher development courses to become expert at helping students develop reflective practice (Banks & Burgess,

1996). The Guyanan GUIDE teacher education programme also uses mentor teachers. An example from Massey University (Broadley, 2000) kept a strong focus on reflection and dialogue but showed how personal visiting time might be partially replaced by other means of assessment. The use of telephone conversations based on videoed, audio taped or detailed print reports of lessons sent into the lecturers before the telephone conversation reduced the number of visits to students during their final (7 week) field experience from three to one. Lecturers were able to use the telephone conversations to help the students critique and reflect on the lesson. Evaluation of the process concluded that by using the range of media as well as the one personal visit the quality of the process may be maintained but some of the costs lessened.

The issue of field experience in a single school has been addressed in the case of The Open University in England by ensuring that two weeks of the field experience time is spent in another school (Banks & Burgess, 1996).

The use of computer mediated communication (CMC) technology has introduced some other approaches to providing dialogue and support for field experience for teacher education students. These initiatives provide examples that could be equally be implemented with distance students. Edens (2000) in a US study noted the constraints posed to reflective discussion by having students in multiple field sites and outlined an initiative where an on-line discussion group was developed to overcome this difficulty for on-campus students. Evidence, based on an analysis of postings, found that students began to function as a professional community, to ask questions and to gather data on which to reflect. She concludes that on-line discussion is viable for promoting reflection and additionally for linking faculty (lecturers) with the teachers at the field sites. Loiselle et al (1996) in another US study with teacher education students found CMC to be an effective means for

collaboration and an effective introduction to critical reflective thinking but noted that to develop and sustain reflective thinking further the help of a professor (lecturer) is required. Roddy (1999) used examples from student postings to a discussion list to demonstrate the potential for CMC to help teacher education students link theory and practice.

The literature on the use of CMC in distance delivered teacher education field experience is also sparse. Selinger (1996) reported on an Open University (UK) study which found that online conferences supported the students both before and during the field experience. The students reflected on teaching issues and shared resources. Bloomfield (2000) in an Australian study, reported on how CMC allowed a small group of external student teachers to communicate with one another and with the lecturer during their field experience. The students indicated that CMC was able to reduce their feelings of isolation. There was some occurrence of reflective comment but Bloomfield concluded that such discussions really did benefit from the presence of a lecturer. The provision of the medium alone was not sufficient to engender deep discussion.

As has been noted dialogue between all the parties to field experience helps to maintain professional and institutional links and support the students. The effectiveness of CMC as reported in the studies above provides models that could be adapted to help strengthen the dialogic links between all the field experience parties.

Another Australian study (Gibson & Gibson, 1995) provided a possible new model that might somewhat address the need for more field experience schools. Real-life teaching situations were used to present examples of best practice to the students. The difference was that the schools involved were viewed and interacted with through the use of interactive television. This approach opened up the use of remote or out of

commuting distance schools for some (observation focused) field experiences. It also enabled a new group of teachers to interact with the students and work with the teacher education institution. This type of innovation could be used to provide students with access to a wide variety of schools and groups of children for some aspects of field experience.

Many programmes, recognizing the diverse settings teachers work in, extend their field experience beyond a multi-cultural orientation to introduce a global perspective (Howey, 1996). There are some provisions now in programmes for students to undertake some of their field experience in another country. Modern communication technologies make supporting these students and linking them together a real possibility.

All of the responses mentioned are innovative responses to the problems posed by field experience for distance delivered initial teacher education programmes. While many of these responses rely on relatively well resourced or government supported programmes there are some examples of local small scale relatively inexpensive responses to the problems. These are important as they show that even at the micro-level distance teacher education students can, with imagination and determination, be well supported. However, it still has to be acknowledged that for many teacher education institutions in developing countries some of the solutions are, at present, little more than a dream. They do however, provide examples of responses and experiences that might provide models or guidance for consideration.

Conclusion

There are certainly common issues in the distance education provision of field experience and a range of responses to these has been explored. When asking if these

are effective responses a series of questions arises. Are some methods more effective than others? What are the trends? Are there approaches that might be widely useful? In response I want to highlight one development as it illustrates the balance there must be between following the new without question and retaining the values and lessons learned over time.

Several of the research studies indicated that computer mediated communication was useful in providing student support and communication for the parties to field experience. To be able to improve these aspects of field experience for distance students is very important. However, the studies also indicated that for the use of CMC to be effective the lecturers needed to be involved. The lesson seems obvious but in these times of cost restraints and calls for accountability the temptation can be to use the new to replace the old. It seems likely from this one small example that what we should always consider is using the new and blending it with the best aspects of the old and proven.

Finally it is interesting to note that the use of the new technologies appears to be of value to all (on-campus and distance) teacher education students during their field experience. Perhaps what we are seeing is a point of convergence where issues do not need to be defined by the mode of delivery but rather solved in the interests of all students.

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