

In Practice

Making the Connection: Linking Theory and Practice in a Special Education Internship Program

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Abstract

In this paper, the authors discuss an approach to dismantle the divide that exists between theory and practice. Connecting theory and practice in teacher education is critical to the work of preparing teacher candidates for the teaching profession. The separation that exists between educational research and teacher in-field practice has forced preservice teacher educators at colleges and universities to critically examine the roots of the disconnection between methods courses and field work in schools. However, conversation about the divide between theory and practice in *special education* preservice teacher programs appears to be scant in the existing research literature. This paper contributes to the literature by focusing on major components of a special education internship program developed through a Higher Education Initiative Grant in narrowing the gap between theory and practice in teacher education. These components include: strong school partnerships, intensive field time, integrating coursework and field work, and reflective practice. Implications for future studies examining the perceptions of special education preservice teachers regarding their ability to connect theory and practice is considered.

Keywords: Connecting Theory and Practice, Special Education, Preservice teachers, Internship

Introduction

Connecting theory and practice in teacher education is critical in preparing teacher candidates for the teaching profession. In 1904, John Dewey argued that professional instruction of teachers must include both theoretical and practical work, raising the question of how theory and practice relate in the context of professional education (as cited in Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009, p. 275). Levine (2006) argued that preservice teacher programs are at risk of producing teachers who know a lot about theory but very little about practice. The great divide that exists between educational research and teacher in-field practices has forced preservice

education at colleges and universities to critically examine the roots of disconnect between method courses and field work in schools. Shulman (1998) claimed,

The field of practice is the place where professionals do their work, and claims for knowledge must pass the ultimate test of value in practice. While the theoretical is the foundation for the entitlement to practice, professional practice itself is the end to which all the knowledge is directed. This is why in all professional preparation we find some conception of a supervised clinical experience.
(p. 518)

Throughout this paper, the authors define the term “theory” according to Zeichner’s (2010) definition, which represents a broad range of concepts and skills associated with the declarative and procedural knowledge taught to preservice teachers in teacher education courses and then “practiced” in field classrooms. Shulman (1998) argued that learning from practical field experience is the major contributor to creating and testing theories of practice, which plays a constructive role in professional learning. However, the provision of a field experience is not enough to adequately prepare future teachers. If there is not an explicit connection between theory and field practice, preservice teachers may complete their education programs without a clear understanding of how theory informs their instructional decision-making. One of the most powerful and effective ways of aiding preservice teachers in making this imperative connection is linking carefully constructed practicum experiences with on-campus courses (Darling-Hammond, 2006). This application is founded on the premise that prospective teachers learn theories in their college courses and then go to schools to practice or apply what they learned on campus (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Tom, 1997). However, the theory and practice dyad is often poorly executed in the work preservice teachers are expected to conduct in their field classrooms. Darling-Hammond (2009) referred to the lack of connection between coursework and field experience as the Achilles heel of teacher education. Although most teacher education programs include field experiences throughout the curriculum, the time that preservice teachers spend in schools is often not carefully planned and frequently the cooperating teacher and the

teacher candidate are left to work out the details of teaching with little guidance and connection to campus courses, and it is often assumed that good teaching practices are learned by observing the classroom teacher in action rather than being directly taught (Darling-Hammond, 2009; Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009). Field experiences must be real-world contexts that provide in-context learning opportunities with clear expectations and guidelines with a shared vision between teacher education programs and partnering schools.

Essential Components of the Special Education Internship Program

In this paper, the authors discuss an approach to dismantle the divide that exists between theory and practice. At a small private college in the eastern United States, the authors oversee a special education internship program for junior and senior education majors seeking certification in PK-4 elementary education and PK-8 special education. While students also complete a semester in the elementary education block as part of their overall program, the focus of this paper is limited to the special education internship semester. This internship program was developed through a Higher Education Initiative Grant and has been in existence for over fifteen years. In that regard, the program was innovative in providing preservice teachers, or “interns” as known in this paper, the opportunity for intensive clinical work integrating theory and practice in special education. Within the boundaries of this paper, the authors discuss four major components of the special education internship program, namely, *strong school partnerships*, *intensive field time*, *integrating coursework and field work*, and *reflective practice* that

existing literature supports as essential in closing the gap between theory and practice in teacher education.

Strong School Partnerships

An essential component for assuring the effective transfer of theory to practice is the development of strong partnerships between teacher training institutions and the local school districts. School partnerships are based on the idea that different expertise exists in school communities and bringing that expertise together with the academic knowledge of the teacher education classes creates a broader view of what is necessary for educating successful teachers (Zeichner, 2010).

To develop and maintain these partnerships, all the stakeholders should be involved in the development and continuation of the program and have a common understanding of the roles and responsibilities of each of the stakeholders (Allen & Wright, 1998). The strong collaborative partnerships between the teacher education program and field based schools are foundational to the success of this special education internship program.

During the initial development of the program through the Higher Education Initiative Grant, college professors involved with the internship program collaborated with teachers and administrators from local schools to examine the benefits of the program for both the interns and the local school agencies. Initially two local school districts formed a partnership with the special education internship program. It was relatively uncomplicated to implement the internship program within selected schools since representatives from these schools assisted in the development of the program and were willing to comply with the structure set forth. It was decided that

each intern would be paired with a cooperating teacher in special education working with students with disabilities for a semester-long field experience. A defining strength of the internship program was built upon the strong collaboration that existed between the participating schools and the college. This collaboration has led to continuous evaluation and analysis of program effectiveness.

Over the past 15 years, necessary changes have been made to improve the special education internship program to provide a better field experience for participating interns and their cooperating teachers. These changes help to keep the program current with the prevailing best practices in the field. For example, most of the classrooms in the early days of the program were self-contained pull out classrooms. One significant change is the current use of primarily inclusive classrooms rather than self-contained special education classrooms. Interns are assigned to a special education certified teacher and provide push in and pull out services to students with disabilities.

As the internship program has gained more school partnerships, professors in the program conduct on-site training sessions with school administrators and prospective cooperating teachers to aid their understanding of the program and to help solidify their roles in the work they conduct with the interns. The internship professors provide a school site orientation for the cooperating teachers to define the program and clarify the roles of the intern, cooperating teacher, and professors. An explanation of content covered in each course of the program along with the corresponding field assignments illustrates the connection between theory being taught and its implementation in daily

classroom practice. Additionally, cooperating teachers receive a handbook to guide them through the semester-long field experience. The handbook provides an ongoing guide for cooperating teachers as they mentor the intern through the semester and assists them with the implementation of the coursework. It contains a summary of the roles of the involved individuals, descriptions of each assignment, basic rules and procedures for the internship as well as a master calendar detailing assignment due dates

Unver (2014) asserted that teamwork paired with effective planning, support from the administration, and competent staff sets the groundwork for a successful program that supports the integration of theory and practice. In the internship program, each partnership is detailed in an affiliation agreement between the college and the participating school outlining the responsibilities of each stakeholder. Furthermore, the ongoing training and support provided to the cooperating teachers, while at the same time valuing their evaluation of the program, enables a dynamic program that is adaptable to meet the changing needs of preservice teachers.

Lastly, a powerful element necessary to build strong partnerships is the ability to maintain ongoing communication and collaboration with the partner schools and cooperating teachers. Allen and Wright (2014) stated that a key issue which creates a disconnect between the field and on campus components of the practicum and in turn detracts from connecting theory and practice is limited communication between the stakeholders. The internship program attempts to avoid this problem by continually providing on-site supervision to interns in their field experience, regularly

communicating with cooperating teachers both in person and via email, and requesting feedback from the cooperating teachers regarding intern performance as well as providing feedback about the program in general. Throughout the semester, cooperating teachers are also encouraged to communicate with the college professors regarding the internship. Since the professors are meeting almost daily with the interns, they are able to debrief what is occurring in the field and address any concerns without delay. Depending on the situation, email, phone or an in-person visit may occur to handle the issue. Additionally, professors meet with each cooperating teacher frequently throughout the semester to provide ongoing support and cultivate a strong partnership.

Intensive Field Time

In the special education internship program, interns are required to complete 230 hours of field time working with special education students in a partnering school in conjunction with taking five focused special education courses on campus. Each course is 3 credits constituting a 15-credit load for the intern, which in conjunction with the intensive field time is considered a full load. Due to recent programmatic changes by the state department of education, interns are now required to complete field hours in an inclusion setting as well as in an alternative special education school setting serving students with moderate to severe disabilities. Therefore, interns currently spend three mornings a week working with students with disabilities in an inclusion setting in a public school and one day a week in an alternative school setting. The time interns spend in both field placements continues throughout a full semester or approximately 16 weeks. This stands in

contrast to many teacher education programs that teach coursework during the beginning of the semester and then place the students in the field for a small number of weeks towards the end of the semester (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Zeichner, 2010). Without providing extensive time spent in the field, preservice teachers frequently do not have opportunities to observe, experiment, and receive feedback about their teaching of methods learned in campus courses (Zeichner, 2010).

Without question, the interns gain valuable learning experiences by working with their special education mentors or cooperating teachers and exposing themselves to classrooms working with students with disabilities. In these settings, they confront different classroom situations required to meet the needs of students with various disabilities in their least restrictive environment. Being in the field daily affords the interns many opportunities to participate in the sequencing of learning that is taking place. This continuity allows them to gradually increase their responsibility of teaching related tasks and bring to completion lessons and units taught during time in the field. During the span of their extensive field work, a strong link connecting theory and field practice is supported and critically examined while the interns are learning to become informed decision-makers.

Integrating Coursework and Field Work

The special education internship program contains five core special education courses coupled with field based assignments or tasks the interns complete under the supervision and ongoing instruction of their college professors. The assignments are practical and allow the students to work under the supervision of the college professor and cooperating

teacher and receive feedback from both. The five courses have been strategically selected to be part of the program to address theory that is essential to the practice of special education. The five courses include: *Academic Skill Intervention*; *Advanced Studies in Special Education* (which addresses the law); *Assessment of Exceptional Children*; *Behavioral Skill Intervention*; and *Teaching Reading to the Exceptional Child*. These courses build upon previous courses the students have already completed in their program such as Educational Psychology, Foundations of Education, and methods courses in language arts, math, science and social studies. Each of these earlier courses contains theory the interns connect to what they are learning in the special education courses to provide a solid pedagogical foundation for their field work.

To recognize this critical element of connecting theory and practice, we highlight a few of the field-based tasks assigned in the special education courses of the internship program.

Academic skill intervention (EDU 472). This course is designed to teach techniques and strategies used to instruct students with special needs by studying specific instructional approaches and learning how to make necessary modifications to classroom curriculum. In general, a strategy is a tool, plan, or method used for accomplishing a task (Beckman, 2002). Strategy use in the classroom is critical to educational success (Kame'enui, Carnine, Dixon, Simmons, & Coyne, 2002). Beckman (2002) suggested that many students' ability to learn has been increased through the deliberate teaching of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. It has been demonstrated that when struggling students are taught strategies and are given

ample encouragement, feedback, and opportunities to use them, students improve in their ability to process information, which, in turn, leads to improved learning. Because not all students will find it easy to imbed strategy use in their learning schema, differentiation of strategies instruction is required, with some students needing more scaffolding and individualized, intensive instruction than others. In the course, *Academic Skill Intervention*, interns learn to teach strategically through student assessment, strategy selection, and explicit strategy instruction. They gain a deep understanding of the importance of strategy instruction and how to teach strategies using an explicit instruction approach. Explicit instruction has been shown to be efficacious in learning and teaching the major components of academic skills instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Goeke, 2009); National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

In the field, interns link theory to practice by compiling a strategy instruction log complete with strategy plans they have taught to students. In the log, they provide rationales for selecting specific strategies, the steps used to teach the strategy explicitly, and the form of assessment used to gauge whether the strategy was successful. This field task forces the intern to plan instruction based on student learning needs and ability. With the mentoring of the professor and cooperating teacher, it allows them to become critical thinkers as they guide students in learning and applying new strategies using the gradual release of responsibility model. The gradual release of responsibility model provides an instructional framework for moving from teacher knowledge to student understanding and application (Fisher &

Frey, 2008; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). Providing multiple opportunities to instruct students in strategy acquisition using best methods is essential in the growth and preparation of preservice teachers and yet another example of linking theory and practice.

Advanced studies in special education (EDU 470). In this course, interns primarily study the law and how it impacts what they do in the field as teachers. A major topic addressed in this course is the relationship between advocacy and law. One assumption of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is that parents have the tools to advocate for their children. However, this is not always the case, and they often need support and assistance in advocating for special education services and fair treatment for their children (Phillips, 2008). "The complexity of both the disabilities involved and the formal rules of the system itself" (p. 1802) often prevent parents from being able to advocate on their own. If teachers are trained regarding advocacy, they can act as this support for the parents as well as advocating directly for the students.

Field experience allows the interns to build on the knowledge of advocacy gained in the college classroom and examine how it is and can be applied in the day to day environment of the school setting. Through examining research related to advocacy, interviewing their cooperating teacher, and looking for areas where advocacy would be warranted and could be applied in their field placement, interns gain more depth of knowledge about advocacy and its importance to the role of a special education teacher. As interns work alongside their cooperating teachers, they observe numerous incidents of advocacy in day to day situations in and out of the

classroom. For example, they may watch the teacher advocating for a student to receive a school prepared breakfast to begin the day without the pains of hunger or for a student who is not succeeding in the general education classroom because required accommodations are not being provided by the teacher. By being afforded opportunities to observe and interact with cooperating teachers who are dedicated to being an advocate for their students, interns understand the importance of taking a stance to fight for their students' rights, happiness, and well-being.

Assessment of exceptional children (EDU 471). Assessment and ongoing data collection is a key element for effective instruction of all students but especially students with disabilities. According to Stecker, Lembke, and Foegen (2008), teachers need "assessment tools that will guide their instructional decision making" (p.48). They proposed that progress monitoring is one of those tools that is especially necessary to "alert teachers when particular students are not progressing at acceptable rates" (p. 48). The practicality and relevance of progress monitoring, since it relies on curriculum based measurement (CBM), makes it a vital tool for preservice teachers to master. CBM employs brief assessments that provide the teacher with ongoing feedback that allows for modification to instruction and does not use up a lot of instructional time (Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2016)

In *Assessment of Exceptional Children*, theory and practice is linked as interns complete an assessment and data collection project that requires them first to identify a student with an IEP, view the student's IEP goals and develop probes for progress monitoring. These probes allow for ongoing data collection of student

performance in the academic areas where the students are struggling. Interns employ a back and forth process of teaching using research based methods, monitoring student learning through the probes, and making modifications to instruction as necessary to assure student progress. Throughout this process, the interns continuously graph the results and reflect on the use of progress monitoring in their decision making. They also make additional recommendations for further instruction as they complete the project.

Behavioral skill intervention (EDU 473). Creating Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIP) for students exhibiting behavior problems is a crucial skill for teachers and is addressed in the Behavioral Skill Intervention course. Gable, Hendrickson, and Van Acker (2001) emphasized the numerous problems that can occur when teachers lack understanding of the correct development and implementation of a BIP leading to continued inappropriate behavior and a negative effect on learning. This supports the need for FBA and BIP instruction for interns. Moreno (2011) provided additional support for the need for conducting a Functional Behavioral Analysis (FBA). He posits that it leads to an understanding of challenging behaviors along with their triggers and reinforcers and is the first step to creating an effective BIP. Consequently, understanding the FBA process and the basic components and principles for designing a BIP will enable a teacher to positively address challenging behaviors and be an agent for behavioral change in their classroom.

Interns have an opportunity to conduct a functional behavioral analysis (FBA) in the field after receiving instruction in the classroom on the concept of functions of behavior and examining the

theories of behaviorism. They first learn numerous data collection techniques, and then use the data they collect to create a behavioral prevention plan (BIP). In collaboration with their cooperating teacher, and after having worked with the students for a number of weeks, interns select a student who exhibits a challenging behavior and use learned data collection techniques to observe the student, collect data, and identify the function of the behavior. Following the analysis of the behavior, the interns develop a BIP to address the challenging behavior and the function that it serves for the student. They identify adjustments to the antecedents or triggers of the behavior, alternative skills to be taught, consequence strategies that will help to control the behavior in the short term, and long term prevention strategies to improve the student's behavior overall. Many of these ideas are then implemented in the classroom to allow the intern to work with the student to ameliorate the problem behavior. The cooperating teacher will often continue to apply the ideas generated by the BIP once the intern leaves the field, thus contributing to continuous growth for the student.

Teaching reading to the exceptional child (EDU 474). Case studies have been widely used as a teaching tool in teacher education to help prospective teachers gain a deeper understanding of educational theories and principles and learn how to apply these theories to situations they may face in the classroom (Shulman, 1992). Merseth (1992) claimed case studies are excellent exemplars to illustrate a model, theory or instructional technique or to showcase best practices. Furthermore, the use of case studies in teacher education courses promotes decision making and problem solving skills, and stimulate

personal reflection. In the special education course, *Teaching Reading to the Exceptional Child*, interns get hands-on experience with reading instruction and intervention by independently conducting their own case study while working with a struggling reader. This assignment provides a valuable opportunity to practice what has been preached about best practices in reading instruction.

In the course, the professor teaches how to assess, analyze, plan and teach specific intervention lessons to target student reading difficulties. In the field, the interns apply this knowledge by working directly with a student diagnosed with a reading disability. This case study task requires the intern to demonstrate the ability to collect and analyze data from informal reading assessments and use this information to plan and teach student-specific reading intervention lessons over the span of several weeks. The final tangible product of the case study exemplifies the various instructional tasks the intern conducted with the struggling reader. By using a case study approach to teach students to read, the intern becomes a critical thinker and decision-maker by being provided the opportunity to "try out" methods and techniques learned in the course; which ultimately is the essence of theory and practice.

Reflective Practices

The progression of reflection in teaching and teacher education goes back to the contributions of educational reformer, John Dewey. Dewey greatly influenced the way teachers use reflection or how people think and learn to increase their personal and professional experiences. He defined reflection as "turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration, thereby enabling

us to act in a deliberate and intentional fashion. Reflection involves an active, persistent and careful consideration” (Dewey as cited in Sweigard, 2007, p. 9). Reflection has long been held as an integral component of learning for teacher candidates as well as practicing teachers.

There is a myriad of positive results that teachers can observe when they utilize reflection in their teaching endeavors. There is an improvement in teaching and lesson planning, increase in self-esteem, greater control of teaching practice, greater belief of influence on student learning, greater interest in gathering data and information on teaching, and an increase in encouraging students to engage in critical thinking practices (Lupinski, Jenkins, Beard, & Jones, 2012). Each of these aspects are thoughtfully considered in the construct of the internship program coursework.

Purposeful reflection relies on analysis of the practice of teaching comparatively with the knowledge of teaching (Mena-Marcos, Gracia-Rodriguez, & Tillema, 2013). In this way, it brings together theory and practice. As mentioned previously, in the internship program, interns spend three mornings a week in an inclusion setting and one day a week in an alternative school setting and attend the five special education core classes on campus in the afternoons. This constant flow between theory learning and field application allows for continuous reflection of what they know and what they do. In other words, ample opportunities are given to reflect and compare what they are observing in the field classroom to what they are learning in the college classroom. As students learn and then practice to learn more, they add and adjust their schema to maintain agreement between these dichotomies.

Hammond and Collins (1991) argued that reflective thinking helps preservice teachers directly connect theory and practice. Reflection is a salient component of the internship program and is embedded in each of the five core special education courses. For example, in the work interns conduct with a struggling reader as part of a large case study assignment, they take a reflective approach toward teaching in multiple ways. For example, during the planning of intervention lessons, they reflect upon different theories of reading to align their instruction with best practices. Following, they reflect upon the reading intervention lessons they have taught and consider whether the lessons were successful in meeting goals set for the student. They then use this information to adjust instruction of future lessons to become a more effective and conscientious teacher. This form of intentional *Reflection-on-Action* (Killion, Joellen, Todnem, & Guy, 1991) is a necessary skill that preservice teachers must learn early in their teaching practice.

As teacher educators, it is imperative to guide our teacher candidates' reflective processes and provide research-based, practical ideas to implement in the classroom (Morewood, 2012). Reflection implemented in coursework includes weekly field reports of best practices in reading instruction. In the field reports, interns are required to observe and link theory to various types of reading instruction they observe in their field classrooms. For example, after they learn effective methods and strategies to teach reading comprehension, they return to the field to observe and write a report comparing what they have learned (theory) to what they have seen (practice) in reading instruction. Subsequently in class

discussion, the interns share their findings which provides an excellent opportunity to scaffold their learning about theory of reading instruction on a deeper level.

Interns also apply *Reflection-on-Action* (Killion, Joellen, Todnem, & Guy, 1991) as they complete their assessment and data collection case study in *Assessment of Exceptional Children* and their FBA and BIP in *Behavioral Skill Intervention*. Using this technique in multiple courses with multiple projects provides the students with more opportunity to practice the skill, allowing them to become more comfortable and confident with the practice and assuring its continued use as they enter the profession.

Additionally, interns practice reflection in a guided way in each course as a follow-up to observation and evaluation of what is and is not occurring in the field. These reflections are a part of many assignments from lesson self-evaluations to the examination of assistive technology and a critique of behavior strategies implemented in the field. Researchers suggest that reflection helps preservice teachers to connect theory and practice. The continuous process of aligning 'how things should be done' (theory) with 'how they are really done' (practice) that is accomplished through reflective thinking, brings knowledge from an abstract level to a level of integration of theory and practice (van den Bos & Brouwer, 2014).

Self-assessment is an effective activity for reflective thinking in teacher preparation coursework (Unver, 2014). Providing teacher candidates with the opportunity to analyze their teaching with an experienced mentor teacher helps define the type of teacher they want to be. A unique component of the internship program is a midterm collaborative

reflective practice where interns meet with their cooperating teacher to discuss their strengths and areas needing further development as a special education teacher. The interns collaborate with the cooperating teacher to select professional goals to improve specific areas to develop as well as creating a written plan delineating steps to meet those goals. During the field experience, the intern and cooperating teacher together track the progress being made toward reaching the goals. This process of collaborative reflection not only allows the intern to deeply contemplate their performance during their internship but constructs a solid foundation for their student teaching experience and future in-service teaching by promoting reflective practice and the ability to articulate professional goals and to develop a plan to accomplish those goals.

Conclusions

This paper adheres to the critical need for programs of teacher education to explicitly connect theory and practice between coursework and field application. However, discussion about the divide between theory and practice in *special education* preservice teacher programs appears to be scant in the existing research literature. Therefore, the authors of this paper have offered a unique lens about the theory and practice relationship by describing the essential components of a special education internship program in conjunction with a more in depth discussion of coherently applying theory to embedded practice.

We propose that a special education internship be composed of four essential components: *strong school partnerships, intensive field time, integrating coursework and field work, and reflective practice.*

While each of the components is important, strong school partnerships, intensive field time, and reflective practice play a supportive role to integrating coursework and field work which is at the core of connecting theory and practice. Explicit links between theory and practice through the use of well-defined assignments have been identified as key to achieving best practice and as one of the most valuable ways to support the interns' learning (Allen & Wright, 2014). Further, Allen and Wright discovered in their research study that students "overwhelmingly supported the notion of linking university coursework assessment to the practicum as a means of bridging the gap between, on the one hand, the university and the school and, on the other hand, theory and practice" (p. 141). Grossman et al. (2009) also linked the "integrated nature of theory and practice" to a "deep interplay" between coursework and the field (p. 276). As illustrated within this paper, the special education internship program has developed teacher preparation courses in such a way as to incorporate this crucial component, creating the lynchpin of our program. Therefore, the authors hope the information provided may be of particular interest to teacher preparation programs in higher education considering the implementation of a special education internship model.

This paper sets the foundation for a future study to allow the authors to hear from the teacher candidates participating in the special education internship program. It would be an immense benefit to examine the successes and challenges the interns experience in their efforts to connect theory and practice between their courses on campus and their work in the special education classrooms. This information

would also assist the professors of the internship program to make necessary and important programmatic changes for overall improvement and to better prepare future teachers of special education.

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