

Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children

<http://tes.sagepub.com/>

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Field Experiences in Inclusive Preschool Settings: Implications for Personnel Preparation

Mary Frances Hanline

Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children 2010 33: 335 originally published online 4 August 2010

DOI: 10.1177/0888406409360144

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://tes.sagepub.com/content/33/4/335>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Teacher Education Division of the Council of Exceptional Children

Additional services and information for *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://tes.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://tes.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://tes.sagepub.com/content/33/4/335.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Oct 14, 2010

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Aug 4, 2010

[What is This?](#)

Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Field Experiences in Inclusive Preschool Settings: Implications for Personnel Preparation

Teacher Education and Special Education
33(4) 335–351
© 2010 Teacher Education Division of
the Council for Exceptional Children
Reprints and permission:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0888406409360144
<http://tese.sagepub.com>



Mary Frances Hanline¹

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify events in the field experiences of Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) preservice teachers that were perceived by the preservice teachers as influencing their thinking in relation to ECSE practices. The preservice teachers' weekly reflective journals, university supervisor observation notes, and preservice teachers' overall evaluations of the field experience were analyzed. Comments were coded into one of the five direct services strands or one of the indirect supports strands of the Division of Early Childhood (DEC) recommended practices in early intervention/ECSE: assessment, child-focused practices, family-based practices, interdisciplinary models, technology applications, personnel preparation, and policy, procedures, and systems change. The majority of data were coded into the strand of child-focused practices. The strand that received the second largest number of codings was assessment; family-based practices had the third highest number of codings. Findings are discussed in relation to structuring ECSE practicum experiences to result in the desired outcomes.

Keywords

Early Childhood Special Education, field experience, personnel preparation, practicum

Field experiences are a necessary component of Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) teacher preparation programs (Bricker & Wid-erstrom, 1996; Miller, Ostrosky et al., 2003; Rosenkoetter & Stayton, 1997; Sandall, Hem-meter, Smith, & McLean, 2005; Winton, McCollum, & Catlett, 2007). The recom-mended practices of the Division of Early Childhood (DEC), Council for Exceptional Children, specify that systematically designed and supervised field experiences be included in ECSE personnel preparation (Stayton, Miller, & Dinnebeil, 2003). Research has shown that field experiences positively affected the knowl-edge and skills of special and general education

preservice teachers in multiple ways. That is, field experiences allow the knowledge learned in academic course work to take on greater meaning (Whitney, Golez, Nagel, & Nieto, 2002), help preservice teachers develop more sophisticated understandings of the teaching-learning process (McLoughlin & Maslak, 2003; O'Brian, Stoner, Appel, & House, 2007), and enhance learning of skills needed to individual-ize instruction (Sears, Cavallaro, & Hall, 2004).

¹School of Teacher Education, Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida, USA

Corresponding Author:
Email: mhanline@fsu.edu

However, in a review of research published in *The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education*, Clift and Brady (2005) concluded that it is difficult to deduct from the research what impact a specific field experience may have on preservice teachers, and the impact may be different from what instructors or supervisors wish it to be. For example, Aiken and Day (1999) found that preservice teachers may interpret field experiences as an off-campus activity, not as a type of on-the-job training; may not be ready cognitively to benefit from the experiences; and may find the experiences misleading, as fieldwork does not allow the opportunity to experience all aspects of teaching. Furthermore, preservice teachers often focus on procedural tasks such as lesson planning and classroom management in field experiences rather than on instructional decision making, self-evaluation, and reflective thinking (Moore, 2003).

Therefore, to increase understanding of the impact of field experiences on preservice teachers, this study explored ECSE preservice teachers' perceptions of (a) field experience events that affected their professional thinking, (b) learning opportunities available in field experience, and (c) issues of concern to the preservice teachers. Analyzing the comments, questions, and evaluations of preservice teachers while they are engaged in field experiences is a different methodology than has been used in the past. Previous research has relied primarily on surveys, focus groups, and interviews that have explored preservice and practicing teachers' overall perceptions of the value of field experience. This study focuses on perceptions of a particular ECSE field experience while the preservice students were engaged in the fieldwork, potentially providing a different type of understanding that will inform teacher educators about how to structure field experiences to result in the desired outcomes.

Method

Participants

Written information provided by 15 preservice ECSE teachers and observation notes from

the preservice teachers' university supervisor (the author of this article) were analyzed. All preservice teachers were female. One was African American, 1 Hispanic, and 13 Caucasian. All had completed an educational sequence of graduating from high school, completing lower division university requirements, then entering a teacher preparation program in their junior year of college (see Table 1). When participating in the field experience for the purposes of this study, the preservice teachers were in their master's year of a combined junior-senior-MS initial teacher preparation program, but data were not analyzed until each participant graduated.

Teacher Preparation Program: ECSE Specialization

The preservice teachers were enrolled in a state university, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education-accredited. 3-year junior-senior-MS degree in special education initial teacher certification program. After completing the junior and senior years of the program, preservice teachers completed an additional year of study to complete their MS degree and student teaching. Course work for the MS degree allowed the preservice teachers to specialize in ECSE, severe disabilities, autism, transition, or response to intervention.

Preservice teachers whose work was analyzed for this study selected ECSE as their specialization. Table 2 shows the progression of required course work for this specialization. All course work was 3 semester hours, unless otherwise noted in Table 2. The specialization fieldwork (practicum in ECSE) required 100 clock hours. All 15 preservice teachers were placed in one of seven preschool settings that included in the same classroom 3- to 5-year-olds who were typically developing, at risk, or identified as having disabilities and/or developmental delays. Cooperating teachers were appropriately certified (see Table 1 for additional information).

Preservice teachers were required to assist the cooperating teacher, plan and conduct large- and small-group activities, evaluate the

Table 1. Information About Preservice Teachers and Field Experience Placements

	Age	Ethnicity	Placement	Cooperating teacher
Amanda	24	Caucasian	(1) inclusive community early education program; children with disabilities had a variety of types and degree of disability	BS/certified in visual disabilities and endorsed in ECSE
Chantrice	24	African American	(3) public school classroom in an early childhood center; children with disabilities had mild to moderate developmental delays	BS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Courtney	24	Caucasian	(4) public school classroom in an early childhood center; children with disabilities had mild to moderate developmental delays and/or autism spectrum disorder	BS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Diane	23	Caucasian	(4) public school classroom in an early childhood center; children with disabilities had mild to moderate developmental delays and/or autism spectrum disorder	BS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Donna	23	Caucasian	(2) inclusive community early education program; children with disabilities had a variety of types and degree of disability	MS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Dorothy	24	Caucasian	(6) public school classroom in an elementary school; children with disabilities had mild to moderate developmental delays	MS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Helen	23	Caucasian	(3) public school classroom in an early childhood center; children with disabilities had mild to moderate developmental delays	BS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Jeanne	23	Caucasian	(1) inclusive community early education program; children had a variety of types and degree of disability	BS/certified in visual disabilities and endorsed in ECSE
Kelsey	23	Caucasian	(5) public school classroom in an early childhood center; BS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE; children with disabilities had mild to moderate developmental delays	BS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Lindsay	25	Caucasian	(7) public school classroom in an early childhood center; children with disabilities had multiple and severe disabilities	MS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Luana	23	Caucasian	(6) public school classroom in an elementary school; children with disabilities had mild to moderate developmental delays	MS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Pamela	24	Caucasian	(2) inclusive community early education program; children with disabilities had a variety of types and degree of disability	MS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Sara	24	Caucasian	(5) public school classroom in an early childhood center; BS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE; children with disabilities had mild to moderate developmental delays	BS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Stephanie	23	Caucasian	(3) public school classroom in an early childhood center; children with disabilities had mild to moderate developmental delays	BS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE
Theresa	24	Hispanic	(4) public school classroom in an early childhood center; children with disabilities had mild to moderate developmental delays and/or autism spectrum disorder	BS/certified in special education and endorsed in ECSE

Note: ECSE = Early Childhood Special Education.

Table 2. Course Work for Initial Teacher Certification with ECSE Specialization

Semester	Required courses
Junior Fall Semester: <i>Introduction to the Profession: Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors</i> 17 semester hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study of Human Exceptionality • Introductory Practicum in Special Education (2 hours) • Teaching Reading in the Elementary School • Typical and Atypical Development and Learning • Introduction to Mental Disabilities • Language Principles for Teachers
Junior Spring Semester: <i>Instruction and Behavior Support Methods for Diverse Population</i> 17 semester hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applied Behavior Analysis for Special Educators • Practicum in Direct Observation (2 hours) • Individualized Reading Instruction for Students With Disabilities • Students With Disabilities in the General Education Curriculum • Teaching Math to Learners with Disabilities • Introduction to Learning and Behavior Disabilities
Senior Fall Semester: <i>Assessment and Methods for Students With High Incidence Disabilities</i> 17 semester hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual Educational Planning • Educational Assessment for Students With Disabilities • Advanced Reading Instruction for Students With Disabilities • Practicum: Students With High Incidence Disabilities (2 hours) • Introduction to Special Education Technology • Teaching English Learners
Senior Spring Semester: <i>Specialized Techniques for Students with Low Incidence Disabilities</i> 17 semester hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Functional Reading and Life Skills • Practicum: Students With Low Incidence Disabilities (2 hours) • Nature of Autism and Severe Communication Disorders • Methods for Teaching Students With Low Incidence Disabilities • Preparing Individuals for Transition • Collaboration With Families, Schools, and the Community
MS Summer Semester: <i>Specialization courses</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Typical and Atypical Early Development
MS Fall Semester: <i>Graduate Program with Specialization</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-Student Teaching Seminar (1 hour) • Ethical, Legal, Safety, and Classroom Management Considerations • Program Development for Young Children With Disabilities • Assessment and Methods in ECSE • Practicum in ECSE
MS Spring Semester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internship/Student Teaching (12 hours) • Master's Comprehensive Examination (0 hours)

Note: ECSE = Early Childhood Special Education.

learning environment, and develop and assess the outcomes of an individualized intervention plan. In addition, they were required to submit weekly reflective journals, participate in bimonthly seminars, and evaluate the course at the end of the semester. The fieldwork met the requirements of quality field experiences in ECSE as proposed by Macy, Squires, and Barton (2009). That is,

- (a) the inclusive settings in which preservice teachers were placed matched the philosophy of the teacher preparation program,
- (b) the requirements of the fieldwork were developed based on the competencies required by the state for the Pre-K Disabilities Endorsement, and

- (c) a variety of inclusive placement options were available, allowing the preservice teachers to meet their individual goals by selecting a disability and the level of disability.

In addition, the preservice teachers

- (a) were placed in settings with a certified ECSE teacher skilled in educational interventions and experienced in providing positive experiences for field experience students;
- (b) experienced diversity in relation to children and professionals in the setting;
- (c) experienced staged learning opportunities, gradually increasing their responsibilities as the semester progressed; and
- (d) had experience with generalizing instructional strategies, as they provided individual, small-group, and large-group instruction in a variety of curriculum areas.

Preservice teachers were observed three times during the semester by the same university supervisor, the author of this article. The supervisor observed the preservice teacher for approximately 1 hour, discussed the observations with the preservice teacher, and provided written feedback that was shared with the cooperating teacher. The university supervisor and cooperating teacher spoke during each observation and communicated through phone conversations and e-mails when necessary. The preservice teacher posted weekly reflective journals on the course Blackboard site and communicated with the university supervisor in private meetings and/or e-mail as needed, as well as during the bimonthly seminars.

Procedure

Methodology. Qualitative research methodology was used. According to Brantlinger, Jimenez,

Klingner, Pugach, and Richardson (2005), “qualitative research is a systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context” (p. 1). The focus of this study was to understand the nature of the impact of field experiences on ECSE preservice teachers’ perceptions of ECSE practices. Credibility of the data, as discussed by Brantlinger et al. (2005), was established as follows:

- *Data triangulation—use of varied data sources.* Data were collected from three sources: the preservice teachers’ weekly reflective journals, university supervision observation notes, and the preservice teachers’ overall evaluations of the field experience.
- *Investigator triangulation/collaborative work—use of several researchers; could involve interrater reliability checks on the coding of data.* A graduate assistant (GA) and the author of this article served as coders of data, reaching agreement on coding outcomes.
- *Disconfirming evidence—the researcher looks for evidence inconsistent with themes.* No outliers were found.
- *Researcher reflexivity—researchers attempt to understand and self-disclose their assumptions, beliefs, values, and biases.* The author’s biases toward inclusive practices influenced the selection of pre-schools that served as field experience sites. That is, preservice teachers were placed in settings that provided services to children who were typical and atypical in the same classroom.

Role of the researcher. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) discuss three conceptualizations of knowledge that drive practices to promote teacher learning. The first conceptualization, *knowledge-for-practice*, assumes there is a distinct knowledge base for teaching and that university researchers generate content and

pedagogical knowledge for teachers to use. *Knowledge-in-practice* assumes that knowledge comes through experience; teaching expertise comes from the profession itself. In contrast, the third conceptualization, *knowledge-of-practice*, assumes that teachers (including teacher educators) play a role in generating knowledge of practice; teachers themselves become researchers, generating knowledge for the profession. In this study, because the researcher was also the university supervisor, she was creating *knowledge-of-practice*. Her classroom—that is, the field experience practicum course—was the setting for research and the goal was to provide knowledge that drives practices in teacher preparation.

Weekly reflective journals. Each week of fieldwork, preservice teachers were required to submit on the course Blackboard site a written reflective journal entry. Journal entries began the second week of the 15-week semester and ended the week before the last week of classes, allowing for 13 entries per preservice teacher. The journal entry included a brief description of what occurred that week and a discussion of a “critical event” that occurred. A critical event was defined as an event that caused the preservice teacher to “rethink” or “reevaluate” a previously held perception, belief, and/or assumption about children, intervention practices, and/or professional roles. The preservice teacher (a) identified the critical event, (b) discussed how and why the event made him or her rethink a perception, and (c) identified what change in behavior resulted from the critical event. The section describing the critical event was coded for this study.

University supervisor observation notes. During each supervision observation, the university supervisor provided an opportunity for the preservice teacher to self-reflect on what had been observed. Within the context of the self-reflection, the university supervisor discussed her observations with the preservice teacher and provided written feedback that was shared with the cooperating teacher. The preservice teacher also was given a chance to comment

on and/or ask questions and share experiences about the fieldwork (i.e., questions about children, instructional practices, parent involvement, etc.). The questions asked and the experiences shared were handwritten by the university supervisor during the observation and coded for this study.

Evaluation of field experience. At the end of the semester, preservice teachers provided anonymous written feedback on the course Blackboard site regarding the quality and quantity of supervision received from their university supervisor and the appropriateness of the fieldwork site for future preservice teachers. In addition, they were asked to identify the most valuable learning experience in the fieldwork and discuss why it was the most valuable. Preservice teacher comments on the most valuable learning experience were analyzed for this study.

Data Analysis

Weekly reflective journals and overall evaluations of the field experience were downloaded from the course Blackboard site by a GA, and the university supervisor’s observation notes were typed by the GA from the supervisor’s handwritten notes.

A total of 182 journal critical event entries out of a possible 195 entries (13 weeks \times 15 preservice teachers) were coded and analyzed. Not all preservice teachers submitted 13 entries, as they did not submit entries when absent from the fieldwork and may have simply missed a week of submission. During the 45 supervision observations (3 visits \times 15 preservice teachers), a total of 135 questions were asked. The majority of the questions were about course requirements and are not appropriate for inclusion in this study. Forty-seven questions were related to the research question and were coded and analyzed. Also during the supervision observations, a total of 42 experiences shared with the university supervisor were coded and analyzed. All 15 responded to the end of the semester evaluation; 15 comments on the most valuable learning experience were coded and analyzed.

Table 3. Number and Percent of Coded Statements/Questions Coded Into Each DEC Direct Service and Indirect Supports Strand

	Critical events recorded in weekly journals (N = 182)		Questions to the university supervisor (N = 47)		Experiences shared with university supervisor (N = 42)		Most valuable learning experience (N = 15)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Assessment	70	38.46	11	23.40	11	26.19	0	0
Child-focused practices	102	56.04	30	63.83	23	54.76	15	100
Family-based practices	5	2.75	6	12.77	8	19.05	0	0
Interdisciplinary models	2	1.11	0	0	0	0	0	0
Technology applications	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Policies, procedures, and system change	1	.55	0	0	0	0	0	0
Personnel preparation	2	1.11	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note: DEC = Division of Early Childhood.

The DEC recommended practices strands in early intervention/ECSE (Sandall et al., 2005) were used as a starter list of codes. The author coded each critical event, question asked, experience shared, and most valuable learning experience into one of the five direct services strands or into one of the two indirect supports strands (see Table 3). The direct services strands are as following:

- (a) *assessment*: the process of collecting information, ideally from multiple sources and means, for making informed decisions for individuals, families, and programs;
- (b) *child-focused practices*: the strategies used to provide learning opportunities for children; intentional acts on the part of adults who interact with children;
- (c) *family-based practices*: provide or mediate the provision of resources and supports necessary for families to have the time, energy, knowledge, and skills to provide their children learning opportunities that promote child competence and development;
- (d) *interdisciplinary models*: an approach in which members of a team employ

their own perspectives and materials but who reach decisions collaboratively; and

- (e) *technology applications*: the use of assistive, instructional/educational, and informational technology to directly affect the lives of young children and their families.

The two indirect supports strands are as follows:

- (a) *policies, procedures, and system change*: infrastructure at federal, state, and local levels that promotes the use of DEC recommended practices, and
- (b) *personnel preparation*: process of providing preservice and in-service preparation personnel to deliver quality services to young children with disabilities and their families.

The GA also coded the data into the DEC direct services and indirect supports strands. When there was a disagreement between the GA and the author, the disagreement was resolved by rereading and discussing the data until consensus was reached, resulting in each critical event, question asked, experience

shared, and most valuable learning experience coded into one of the five direct services strands or into one of the two indirect supports strands. No outliers were noted, as all information could be coded into one of the strands.

When adequate data were available in a strand, the strand was examined for themes within the preservice teachers' critical event. A constant comparison approach was used (Charmaz, 2000). That is, the author read each critical event, determining initial themes that emerged from the first reading. The author then read the questions posed to her during supervision, comparing and contrasting themes emerging from this data source to the themes from the critical events. Decisions were made to collapse or add new themes. The author then read the experiences shared with her during supervision, repeating the process of returning to the critical events and questions posed and adding or collapsing themes. This process was repeated while reading the most valuable learning experience identified by the preservice teachers. Returning to the data to constantly compare and reflect allowed the themes that emerged to accurately reflect the information provided by the preservice teachers. This analysis resulted in two themes in the DEC strand child-focused practice, two in assessment, and two in family-based practices.

The themes and supporting data were shared with the GA to verify accuracy of the identified themes, as the GA was familiar with the field experience requirements, field experience sites, and the content of the academic ECSE course work. The GA agreed with all themes in the assessment and family-based practices themes. However, the original two themes for the child-focused practices theme were broken out further into three themes after the author and GA read and discussed the data coded into that DEC strand.

Results

The number of coded and analyzed critical events in the reflective journal entries,

questions asked of and experiences shared with the university supervisor, and the preservice teachers' most valuable learning experience for each DEC recommended practices direct services or indirect supports strand is provided in Table 3. The majority of data from all data sources were coded into the direct services strand of child-focused practices: 56.04% of journal entries, 63.83% of questions posed to the university supervisor, 54.76% of experiences shared with the university supervisor, and 100% of the most valuable learning experience in the field experience. The DEC direct services strand that received the second largest number of codings was assessment. That is, 38.46% of critical events were coded as related to assessment, 23.40% of questions posed to the university supervisor, and 26.10% of experiences shared with the university supervisor. The family-based practices strand received the third highest number of codings: 2.75% of critical events, 12.77% of questions posed to the university supervisor, and 19.05% of experiences shared with the university supervisor.

No data were coded into the DEC strand of technological applications, and minimal data were coded into interdisciplinary models, personnel preparation, or policies, procedures, and system change. Therefore, these strands were not analyzed for themes.

Child-Focused Practices Strand

Three themes emerged from analysis of data coded into the child-focused practices strand. The themes were (a) effecting positive individual child change, (b) respect for effective teaching, and (c) the importance of inclusion in promoting child learning.

Effecting positive individual child change. Preservice teachers frequently used words such as *awesome*, *couldn't believe*, *amazed*, *so fantastic*, and *wonderful* when reporting that their own child-focused interventions were effective. It was not unusual for the critical event to be a report of a successful intervention experience with a child and the

impact the success would have on future teaching. Theresa, working in a classroom that included young children with autism, stated,

On Friday, I began collecting data to note the progress made through Samy's individualized language intervention. I was amazed at the numbers. . . . We've been able to increase his choices, because he now can distinguish between the pictures and be in control of what he eats. It's so exciting! I will always try to help the children I teach be able to make choices.

Amanda also expressed that her success in teaching a young child would help her remember to implement best practice:

I am working with a child on keeping his hands in his own space and communicating his needs at feeding times. He went from a baseline of 15 times touching other child and zero times of communicating to rarely ever touching other child and using the sign for "more" and "done." Since the child has started to sign his needs during feeding times, his behavior of touching other children and their food has decreased dramatically. This just goes to show that communication can do great things, even for a child as young as 3 who cannot speak yet! It also shows the importance of replacement behaviors in positive behavior support (PBS). I hope I always remember to teach replacement behaviors.

The ability to work effectively with an individual child within a group setting was often identified as the most valuable learning experience, providing data consistent with the theme of ability to effect positive individual child change. Preservice teachers also recognized that their own individual behaviors would influence how effective they would be in promoting positive individual

child growth. As an example, Courtney stated that she had learned to take control of her class and was no longer afraid to be assertive if it would help a preschooler learn a new skill. Amanda identified her newfound ability to be flexible in order to more effectively teach a child as her most valuable learning experience:

. . . flexibility because at times I feel I could have slight OCD tendencies and the littlest thing out of place could interrupt my thoughts and take my attention away from teaching the children. In Pre-K, I was forced to overlook this and make it a point to not worry when tables were dirty and blocks all askew. I could then focus on being the best teacher I could so that I could help each child be the best he can.

Questions posed to and experiences shared with the university supervisor often centered around what the supervisor would recommend in relation to intervention with a particular child, as the preservice teachers sought information to help them be as effective in teaching individual children as possible. The majority of questions focused around intervening with aggressive behavior, teaching toileting skills, and encouraging child engagement. Examples include the following:

- I think Michael could be independent with toileting. How do I go about toilet-training him? (Pamela)
- I worry about Adaira. She doesn't eat hardly anything all day. Is there anything I can do for her? (Lindsay)

Preservice teachers also shared during supervision observations their success stories working with individual children. The experiences reinforced the efforts of the preservice teachers, who often seemed surprised at their success, as they reported success above and beyond what the teaching

staff at the field site were able to accomplish. Chantrice spoke about working on puzzles with a little girl whom her cooperating teacher described as having difficulties with communication. She reported that the little girl began talking to her. Chantrice concluded, "I believe she just needed more one-on-one time to really open up." Kelsey reported that a child with whom she was working began to talk "more than ever" and was pleased to see the progress the child was making, as the teaching staff at her field experience site told her that the child cried most of the time, but now the child grins from ear to ear when Kelsey arrives at the program. Kelsey declared, "It's more than I ever expected to get out of this."

Respect for effective teaching. The second theme in the child-focused practices strand was that of respect for teaching techniques used by cooperating teachers and other adults in the classroom. All preservice teachers felt they were in programs with cooperating teachers implementing best practice, allowing them to see practices about which they were learning in academic classes. They spoke and wrote about their respect for the knowledge and skill levels of cooperating teachers, as well as the time and effort required to plan and implement effective instruction and to organize and maintain the learning environment. Many were impressed that teachers could maintain child engagement in group activities and remain calm in challenging situations. This theme is documented in the following critical event described by Diane:

One of the boys in the class has some challenging behaviors, and he got very angry when another child tried to share a toy with him. He wanted the toy all to himself, not to share it. He was screaming, throwing objects, hitting anyone within reach, and Mrs. Lamb simply redirected his attention to a different toy. It worked! He completely forgot about the toy that he was so angry about and was content with the new toy that he was holding. This situation put clarification on all the

information about behavior management and positive behavior support that we have been learning. When in class, you sit there and wonder how all of the information is put to use and how it works. I saw it put in use and saw it work. I was so happy to see that the decision Mrs. Lamb made was one that I have learned about and now have seen firsthand. It is so important to have educators that are truly educated themselves and understand how to use all of the information learned. But it is a lot of work to remain informed and to do best practices.

Importance of inclusion in promoting child learning. All preservice teachers were placed in settings that included children with and without disabilities in the same classroom. The third theme in the child-focused strand thus seemed to be a reflection of the service delivery model in which preservice teachers had their field experience. When inclusion was mentioned, it was always in support of the service delivery model because of its potential positive impact on individual children's learning, but preservice teachers also expressed caution that adequate and appropriate services would be available. The importance of peer modeling as an intervention strategy was recognized in reflective journals, conversations with the university supervisor, and in overall evaluations of the fieldwork experience. Preservice teachers also noted the potential positive influence of inclusion on children without disabilities to provide opportunities to learn about diversity at a young age. As an example, when identifying the most valuable learning opportunity of her field experience, Donna wrote about the chance to learn about the importance of inclusive settings for promoting the development of individual children:

I do not know how every pre-k program is not inclusive, and why it isn't a law that it should be inclusive. In every pre-k program that I have been to, the

children who are typical accept just as much the children who have disabilities than the children that do not. Children in programs that are not inclusive do not get the stimulation that typical peers give and those children would not learn as much. Every child, typical or atypical, deserves to be with peers different from they are. It is a very good learning process for all children. . . . However, a class of children from a distance could appear full of “typical” children, but disabilities are so diverse and widespread that you cannot really tell what a class is composed of until you get to know the children. This thought causes me to be fearful about the children who are in child care with staff who do not know about disabilities or intervention. What kind of services and care are the children receiving?

Assessment Strand

The assessment strand received the second largest number of written and oral comments made by preservice teachers. None mentioned assessment in their reports of the most valuable learning experience provided by the field experience, so the data analyzed came from critical events, questions posed to the university supervisor, and experiences shared with the university supervisor. Two themes emerged from analysis of these data: (a) the importance of ongoing assessment and (b) challenges of assessment in natural environments.

The importance of ongoing assessment. All questions posed to the university supervisor during observations supported the theme of the importance of ongoing assessment. When asking the questions, preservice teachers recognized that data collection was necessary to establish that progress was being made. The questions related to methods used to document changes in children’s behavior, especially in relation to their individualized intervention plan (a requirement of the field

experience). Because of the recognition of the importance of ongoing assessment, they wanted to be sure that the data being collected were appropriate for the learning objective and would document change as needed. Many asked about developing a system that was easy to use so they could use it during their student teaching and in their classrooms after graduation.

The first theme also was supported by the written critical events and by the experiences shared with the university supervisor. Helen, for example, shared during a supervision observation the data she had collected for her individualized intervention plan and said excitedly,

I didn’t realize Omari knew his colors so well. I never realized how important it is to collect data, even though we talk about it in classes all the time.

Challenges of assessment in natural environments. This second theme was evident in experiences shared with the university supervisor and in critical events. While recognizing the significant role played by assessment in the intervention process, preservice teachers also noted that it is difficult for teachers to find the time to collect assessment data within the context of the daily schedule of the preschool. As part of a critical event, Dorothy wrote,

I noticed that Mrs. Paul had some checklists in her hand. While interacting with children and observing the children play with each other and by themselves, she would jot down some notes, check items off, and continue to observe. . . . It is so important to remember that a key note for developmental evaluations is teacher observation, but it is so very time-consuming. And what does the teacher do in the middle of data collection if a child has a seizure? Or a child falls down? Or a child hits another child?

Stephanie shared her observation of her cooperating teacher’s ongoing evaluation

system. She said that her cooperating teacher spends at least 30 minutes a day after the children leave and records the data collected that day. When asked by Stephanie why she did that, the cooperating teacher explained that the data helped her communicate positive changes with parents. The cooperating teacher also told Stephanie that she once shared data with the school psychologist and the psychologist was “blown away” with the data. Stephanie ended up saying, “I guess it’s worth it. . . . I just don’t know how Ms. Jenny does it.”

Family-Based Practices Strand

Data coded into the family-based practices strand was the third largest strand into which data were coded. However, the number of written and spoken statements was not large. That is, 5 out of 182 critical events written by preservice teachers, 6 of 47 questions asked of the university supervisor, and 8 of 42 shared experiences were related to family-based practices. The lower number (in comparison with the child-focused practices and assessment strands) is not surprising, as many preservice teachers were not in their field experience sites during the time children were dropped off or picked up, many children came to school on a bus, and some of the policies in the field sites limited university student interactions with families. However, in all three data sources, two themes emerged: (a) respect and concern for families and (b) exasperation when the preservice teachers felt parents were not involved enough in their child’s education.

Respect and concern for families. Preservice teachers, when writing about families in their reflective journals or speaking about families with the university supervisor, expressed dismay at the young age of many parents, the poverty in which many children lived, and the effect of the child’s disability on the parents. They frequently put themselves in the place of a parent and wondered if they would be able to be a “good parent” in a similar situation. They readily admitted that they had

had no idea of all the responsibilities families assumed. Diane talked of being “humbled” by parents, Chantrice admitted that she would be “constantly stressed out” if she were in the shoes of a mother who was single parenting two children under the age of 5, and Theresa said that she was “overwhelmed just thinking” about the responsibilities of a grandmother raising her grandchildren. Lindsay shared that she had gone home from her first day of field experience and cried when she thought of the families of children with severe disabilities in her placement. The concern for families resulted in Dorothy writing the following as part of her critical event:

I had to rethink my views when it came to family involvement. Of course, there are parents who do things such as bringing in pets, but from what I have seen so far, the majority of the children are not coming from that type of family. Most of the moms are very young, and a lot of times the grandmothers of the children are picking them up from school . . . allowing me to see and to reevaluate the diversity of what the word *family* means to different people and different cultures and what these families have to do or give up in order to survive.

Exasperation when the preservice teachers felt parents were not involved enough in their child’s education. While expressing concern about the responsibilities and stresses of families, preservice teachers also expressed frustration when they felt parents were not as involved in their child’s education as the preservice teacher expected. The preservice teachers spoke and wrote about the critical importance of family involvement using words and phrases such as *significant*, *really should be required*, and *too important not to happen*. Jeanne shared the story of a father telling the cooperating teacher not to put his child on the bus to go home at the end of the school day. But, at dismissal, the father had made no other arrangements for his child to be picked up from school. Jeanne said, “I was shocked,”

when relaying this experience. Sara expressed her frustration in the following reflective journal entry:

I have noticed we have some uninvolved parents/guardians at the preschool. I see them drop off their kids while talking on their cell phone and not paying their child any attention. . . . This makes me so sad. I hate seeing parents uninvolved and I see how the children are affected by this. You can see the difference in these children's actions, language, and attitudes. I also see some very involved parents, who pay close attention to their children, which makes me happy. I wish the parents would make more of an effort to be involved with their child's life and school. I'm just glad there are good teachers at this center for these children. I hope I will be able to make a difference in a child's life as these teachers are.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify events in the field experiences of preservice ECSE teachers that were perceived by the preservice teachers as influencing their thinking about intervention practices. In this study, I utilized qualitative research methodology to analyze data from three sources: preservice teachers' weekly reflective journals, university supervisor observation notes, and preservice teachers' overall evaluations of the field experience. Information provided by 15 preservice teachers enrolled in a junior-senior-MS degree initial teacher preparation program and specializing in ECSE in their graduate year of study was used. The assumption was that preservice teachers would write and talk about those experiences that most affected them during their field experience. The written and oral information provided by the preservice teachers was coded into one of the five direct services or one of the two indirect supports strands of the DEC recommended practices

strands. The three direct services strands into which adequate data were available for analysis were child-focused practices, assessment, and family-based practices.

The majority of information provided by preservice teachers fell into the child-focused practices strand. Preservice teachers most likely provided the most information in this strand, as the focus of their fieldwork related to interventions with individual children. Preservice teachers were quick to recognize when their behaviors positively affected a particular child, when cooperating teachers were using effective intervention techniques, and how the environment created by an inclusive service delivery model could positively influence children's development. They also were quick to recognize the positive outcomes of best practices delivered by cooperating teachers and by themselves, resulting in a sense of satisfaction and pride. Miller, Ostrosky et al. (2003) stated that "meaningful work with children and families in practica and internships holds the key to effective performance as a professional who is confident in meeting diverse abilities and needs" (p. 113). In this study, preservice teachers observed and experienced the impact of best practices, resulting in not only a sense of confidence but also a commitment to continued use of effective practices in their own teaching.

Similar to the child-focused intervention practices, preservice teachers were able to recognize, value, and respect the application of best practice in conducting ongoing assessments of children within the typical activities of the preschool. They admired their cooperating teachers for regularly collecting assessment data in an ongoing fashion. They were anxious to learn how to efficiently collect data so that they could do so in their own teaching.

Preservice teachers spoke and wrote about family-based practices less than about child-focused practices and assessment, possibly a function of limited contact with families in their field experience sites. However, the preservice teachers recognized the tremendous responsibility of and challenges faced by many families. They recognized that best

practice required services to be family centered and that early education would be most effective with family involvement but were frustrated when parents seemed not to do what they expected.

Implications for the Field

Findings from this study have three implications for the preparation of ECSE teachers. The first implication is that preservice teachers must learn effective intervention strategies that can be used in field experiences. The strategies can be learned in academic classes and practiced in field experience settings. The preservice teachers in this study were rewarded by the success they and their cooperating teachers had in promoting positive child change when best practices were implemented. Experiencing success resulted in the preservice teachers wanting to continue to be effective when intervening with individual children. This supports the personnel preparation recommended practices of DEC that "students need opportunities to practice research-based instructional strategies with individuals, small groups, and large groups in the service site" (Miller, Ostrosky et al., 2003, p. 113). The DEC recommended practices in personnel preparation further suggest that field experiences be designed so that preservice teachers learn that teaching is a planned activity designed to meet the needs of the learners so that preservice teachers build knowledge and feel competent about their work with children (Dinnebeil, Benner, Boone, & Sparkman, 2003). The preservice teachers in this study recognized the daily challenges in implementing best practice but were committed to their implementation. Findings from this study indicate that success implementing best practices (particularly those that result in positive child change) in field experiences will serve to strengthen this commitment.

Preservice teachers in this study wrote and spoke more about the DEC recommended practices strands that related most directly to their fieldwork requirements and

experiences. This finding suggests that preservice teachers are most directly affected by what they experience and implies that field experiences must be carefully structured to provide the learning desired and the learning that encompasses all aspects of the professional role of ECSE professional. In this study, preservice teachers wrote and spoke minimally about technology applications and interdisciplinary models (both direct service strands), having had little experience with either in their field experiences. Lava, Recchia, and Giovacco-Johnson (2004) found that practicing ECSE teachers reported that they assumed multiple roles in their work. Most teachers felt less prepared to take on challenges and roles related to collaboration, working with families, obtaining administrative support, and so forth than to teach young children. However, skills beyond teaching children were needed for success in their positions. Therefore, it is critical that the ECSE personnel programs continue to strive to provide field experiences that mirror the breadth and depth of the role of the ECSE professional. Finding programs that are truly optimal sites for preservice teachers' development is an area of concern in the field (Miller & Stayton, 2003).

A third implication of this study centers around the themes that emerged from the family-based practices strand. Preservice teachers were torn between recognizing the difficulties of parenting a young child with disabilities and their desire for parents to be involved in their child's education, as preservice students were confident that parental involvement would have a positive effect on the children's development. These themes may be a function of the academic content and field experiences of the personnel preparation program in which the preservice teachers were enrolled, as preservice teachers had minimal contact with families. Additional contact and experience with families may have resulted in different views. However, difficulty locating field experience sites that provide experience in family-centered intervention is not limited to his program but is recognized as a national

issue in ECSE personnel preparation (Brotherston, Summers, Bruns, & Sharp, 2008).

Being able to implement family-centered practices is a critical competency area that sets ECSE aside from other special education personnel preparation areas (Bruder & Dunst, 2005; Miller, Niemeyer, & Brotherston, 2003), yet personnel preparation programs are challenged to provide opportunities for experience with families (Miller & Stayton, 2003). The DEC recommended practices suggest including families in preservice learning activities as co-instructors or co-presenters. Brotherston et al. (2008) suggested that universities provide financial support for families to participate in personnel preparation activities, recruit families from a wide range of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and provide families with emotional, informational, and logistical support when participating in personnel preparation activities. Furthermore, university faculty working with early intervention programs through in-service and other professional development activities may increase the opportunity for preservice students to obtain experience in family-centered intervention. As this study showed that preservice teachers are most affected by the experiences in fieldwork in which they are most successful, it is critical that university personnel work diligently to provide positive experiences in family-centered intervention.

Limitations

Findings of this study should be generalized to other preservice teachers with caution, as this study reflected the perceptions of primarily female Caucasian participants of one initial teacher preparation program in one southern state. All participants had followed a traditional course of study through high school and college.

Another limitation may be the familiarity of the author to the teacher preparation program, the field experience settings, and the preservice teachers. However, preservice teachers were encouraged to write and speak freely, assured that their critical events and

questions asked of and experiences shared with their university supervisor would not affect their grade in the field experience course. Final evaluations of the field experience were done anonymously. In addition, the author was blind to the particular preservice teacher and to the field experience setting. Furthermore, the data were analyzed after the preservice teachers had graduated from the university. Therefore, it is believed the information obtained accurately reflects the preservice teachers' perceptions and was not overly influenced by researcher bias.

Summary

Field experiences can benefit preservice teachers in multiple ways, including the opportunity to connect the conceptual and theoretical knowledge gained in the academic classroom to the realities of providing early intervention services. The results of this study indicate that preservice teachers were most positively affected by experiences that allowed them to observe or implement intervention practices that were effective in increasing the skills of young children, suggesting that preservice teachers should enter fieldwork equipped with knowledge of effective teaching strategies. In the words of Courtney,

I feel every day that I am in my fieldwork placement, I gain new experience and become more confident in teaching. I have been able to teach the whole group and small group. I have been able to work with children one-on-one and I have been able to develop a good relationship with all the teachers in the classroom. Even though I feel I have learned a lot, I feel I have much more to learn. I am still learning how to intervene and help the children solve their conflicts. I am learning how to become more assertive and more confident in teaching. I think that being willing to continuously grow and learn with each teaching experience is what make[s] you [a] great teacher. I am excited to be

able to have this opportunity to grow and learn through my fieldwork. I realized that I have made an impact on each of these children's lives, and I want to continue doing that for many more children in the future.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

References

- Aiken, I. P., & Day, B. D. (1999). Early field experiences in preservice teacher education: Research and student perspectives. *Action in Teacher Education, 21*, 7-12.
- Brantlinger, E., Jimenez, R., Klingner, J., Pugach, M., & Richardson, V. (2005). Qualitative studies in special education. *Exceptional Children, 71*, 195-207.
- Bricker, D., & Widerstrom, A. (Eds.). (1996). *Preparing personnel to work with infants and young children and their families: A team approach*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Brotherson, M. J., Summers, J. A., Bruns, D. A., & Sharp, L. M. (2008). Family-centered practices: Working in partnership with families. In P. J. Winton, J. A. McCollum, & C. Catlett (Eds.), *Practical approaches to early childhood professional development: Evidence, strategies, and resources* (pp. 53-80). Washington, DC: Zero to Three.
- Bruder, M. B., & Dunst, C. (2005). Personnel preparation in recommended early intervention practices: Degree of emphasis across disciplines. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 25*, 25-33.
- Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 509-536). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Clift, R. T., & Brady, P. (2005). Research on methods courses and field experiences. In M. Cochran-Smith & K. M. Zeichner (Eds.), *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education* (pp. 309-424). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in community. *Review of Research in Education, 24*, 249-305.
- Dinnebeil, L. A., Benner, S., Boone, H., & Sparkman, K. (2003). Design and sequence of learning activities. In V. D. Stayton, P. S. Miller, & L. A. Dinnebeil (Eds.), *DEC personnel preparation in early childhood special education: Implementing the DEC recommended practices* (pp. 61-84). Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Lava, V. F., Recchia, S. L., & Giovacco-Johnson, T. (2004). Early childhood special educators reflect on their preparation and practice. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 27*, 190-201.
- Macy, M., Squires, J. K., & Barton, E. E. (2009). Structuring practicum experiences in early intervention and early childhood special education. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 28*, 209-218.
- McLoughlin, S. A., & Maslak, M. (2003). Prospective teachers' perceptions of development during fieldwork: Tutoring as a vehicle for professional growth. *The Teacher Educator, 38*, 267-284.
- Miller, P., Niemeyer, J. A., & Brotherson, M. J. (2003). Family participation in personnel preparation. In V. D. Stayton, P. S. Miller, & L. A. Dinnebeil (Eds.), *DEC personnel preparation in early childhood special education: Implementing the DEC recommended practices* (pp. 11-36). Longmont, CO: Sopris West; Missoula, MT: Division for Early Childhood.
- Miller, P., Ostrosky, M., Laumann, B., Thorpe, E., Sanchez, S., & Fader-Dunne, L. (2003). Quality field experiences underlying program mastery. In V. D. Stayton, P. S. Miller, & L. A. Dinnebeil (Eds.), *DEC personnel preparation in early childhood special education: Implementing the DEC recommended practices* (pp. 113-138). Longmont, CO: Sopris West; Missoula, MT: Division for Early Childhood.

- Miller, P. S., & Stayton, V. D. (2003). Understanding and meeting the challenges to implementation of recommended practices in personnel preparation. In V. D. Stayton, P. S. Miller, & L. A. Dinnebeil (Eds.), *DEC personnel preparation in early childhood special education: Implementing the DEC recommended practices* (pp. 183-195). Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Moore, R. (2003). Reexamining the field experiences of preservice teachers. *Journal of Teacher Education, 54*, 31-42.
- O'Brian, M., Stoner, J., Appel, K., & House, J. J. (2007). The first field experience: Perspectives of preservice and cooperating teachers. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 30*, 264-275.
- Rosenkoetter, S. E., & Stayton, V. D. (1997). Designing and implementing innovative, interdisciplinary practica. In P. J. Winton, J. A. McCollum, & C. Catlett (Eds.), *Reforming personnel preparation in early intervention: Issues, models, and practical strategies* (pp. 453-474). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
- Sandall, S., Hemmeter, M. L., Smith, B. J., & McLean, M. E. (2005). *DEC recommended practices: A comprehensive guide for practical application*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Sears, S., Cavallaro, C., & Hall, S. (2004). Quality early field experiences for undergraduates. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 27*, 75-79.
- Stayton, V. D., Miller, P. S., & Dinnebeil, L. A. (Eds.). (2003). *DEC personnel preparation in early childhood special education: Implementing the DEC recommended practices*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Whitney, L., Golez, F., Nagel, G., & Nieto, C. (2002). Listening to voices of practicing teachers to examine the effectiveness of a teacher education program. *Action in Teacher Education, 23*, 69-76.
- Winton, P. J., McCollum, J. A., & Catlett, C. (Eds.). (2007). *Practical approaches to early childhood professional development: Evidence, strategies, and resources*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three.

Bio

Mary Frances Hanline, PhD, is an Associate Professor at Florida State University. Her work centers around the preparation of ECSE teachers and research in play-based inclusive preschools.