Field Experiences in Literacy Teacher Preparation: A Snapshot of Current Practices

Laurie A. Sharp
West Texas A&M University, laurie.sharp2013@gmail.com

Rebekah Piper
Texas A&M University - San Antonio, rebekah.piper@tamusa.edu

Roberta D. Raymond
University of Houston - Clear Lake, raymond@uhcl.edu

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Laurie A. Sharp
West Texas A&M University
Rebekah Piper
Texas A&M University—San Antonio
Roberta D. Raymond
University of Houston—Clear Lake

This qualitative study used social constructivism as a theoretical lens to examine ways in which literacy teacher educators incorporate field experiences during literacy coursework. A cross-sectional survey was distributed among literacy teacher educators affiliated with teacher preparation programs located in a single Southern state. Responses related to field experiences were retrieved from 42 surveys and analyzed with two cycles of coding. Findings indicated that preservice teachers completed a range of field experiences prior to student teaching that involved observing literacy instruction and leading literacy instruction with individual students and small groups of students. Incongruences between reported field experiences and recommendations in extant literature were discussed, along with implications for practice. Suggestions for strengthening field experiences were also provided.
Keywords: field experiences, literacy teacher preparation, preservice teachers, literacy teacher educators

Introduction

Field experiences are a vital practice-based requirement in literacy teacher preparation (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2015; ILA & National Council of Teachers [NCTE], 2017). Generally, early programmatic field experiences provide preservice teachers with opportunities to observe exceptional literacy teachers within authentic pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade settings (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2006). As preservice teachers progress through their preparation program, they practice aspects of teaching through guided and supervised field experiences that gradually increase in complexity over time. Towards the end of their preparation program, preservice teachers customarily

complete a semester- or year-long student teaching requirement. During student teaching, preservice teachers are assigned to specific classrooms and work under the direction of the classroom teacher to gradually assume full teaching responsibilities. A succession of well-planned field experiences is an essential feature of effective literacy teacher preparation programs (Lacina & Block, 2011).

Field experiences facilitate opportunities for preservice teachers to apply understandings about literacy content and pedagogy learned through coursework with actual students in genuine contexts (ILA & NCTE, 2017). Ideally, preservice teachers learn how to manage internal and external mediating influences associated with literacy teaching and learning, such as preservice teachers' attitudes and dispositions, available instructional resources, and accountability demands (Scales et al., 2017). Yet, preservice teachers often begin student teaching with a limited capacity to generalize robust declarative knowledge into actual teaching practices (Grisham et al., 2014). This phenomenon warrants concern; preservice teachers should enter student teaching with a foundation of knowledge and experiences from which they continue positioning themselves as literacy teachers (Moore, 2003; Scales et al., 2018). It is equally troubling that during student teaching, preservice teachers often divert their teaching practices away from what they learned in their preparation program's coursework and field experiences to what is commonly observed in school settings (Samson, Linek, Raine, & Szabo, 2010; Young et al., 2017).

Extant literature has advocated that preservice teachers explore teaching and learning through field experiences that are judiciously aligned with coursework and closely mentored by knowledgeable professionals (e.g., Ball & Cohen, 1999; Clift & Brady, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006a, 2006b; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005; Zeichner, 1996, 2010; Zeichner & Conklin, 2008). However, there are no clear guidelines for how teacher preparation programs should incorporate field experiences to ensure that preservice teachers engage with "quality experiences in learning to teach literacy" (ILA, 2015, p. 7). In an age of education reform, preservice teachers must learn how to address literacy through "real teaching" that is "meaningful and powerful" to students (ILA, 2018, pp. 3-4). Thus, it is necessary for teacher preparation programs to examine the design and structure of literacy-based field experiences and identify ways to better support the growth and development of future literacy teachers. With this in mind, the purpose of the present study was to explore the following research question: How do literacy teacher educators incorporate field experiences during literacy coursework?

Overview of Field Experiences

A synthesis of literature indicates that optimal field experiences occur in an extended and deliberate manner throughout literacy teacher preparation.

During optimal field experiences, preservice teachers engage with practice-based work in one-on-one (Hoffman, Wetzel, & Peterson, 2016), small group (Lipp & Helfrich, 2016), and whole group (Rosaen, Meyer, Strachanz, & Meier, 2016) instructional situations. Ideally, field experiences provide preservice teachers with opportunities to engage in practice-based work located in rural (Ajayi, 2014), suburban (Johnson, 2010), and urban (Lazar, 2018) school contexts. These field experiences may also take place in settings beyond schools, such as community-based entities (Brayko, 2013). Furthermore, high-quality field experiences expose preservice teachers to a wide-range of student diversity, including students who have cultural and linguistic differences (Xu, 2000) and exceptionalities (Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014). Ultimately, the primary goal of field experiences is to prepare preservice teachers "for everyday realities and complexities of schools and classrooms" (Sleeter, 2008, p. 1948).

University personnel and classroom teachers who act as mentors to preservice teachers typically supervise field experiences (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2006). Mentors support preservice teachers during observation-based field experiences by scaffolding preservice teachers' use of observational tools (Young & Bender-Slack, 2011) and facilitating discussions in university classes among preservice teachers concerning observed literacy practices in the field (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2006). Similarly, mentors support preservice teachers with guided and supervised field experiences by demonstrating and modeling explicit teaching techniques (Linek et al., 1999), holding debriefing discussions (Harlin, 1999), and providing timely and helpful feedback (Fang & Ashley, 2004). Mentors also employ a repertoire of coaching strategies to preserve the complexities of teaching, promote ethical and professional decision-making, and keep teaching attainable among preservice teachers (Husbye, Wessel Powell, Vander Zanden, & Karalis, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

The present study drew upon understandings about social constructivism in teacher preparation. Social constructivism is rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning, which emphasizes the role of language and social interactions during the construction of knowledge (Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, & Souberman, 1978; Kozulin, 1986). Sigel (1978) contended that individuals construct evolving understandings through cyclical processes of experience and thought. Thus, as preservice teachers experience literacy teaching and learning in real classrooms contexts, literacy teacher educators must provide them with sufficient encouragement and time to reflect on their learning individually and with others in an equitable and inclusive learning community (Beck & Kosnik, 2006). By doing so, preservice teachers help each other create personal meanings with pedagogy (Noel, 2000).

Methods

Due to nuances with teacher licensure among each state's education agency (Cappello & Farnan, 2006), the present student was conducted in a single Southern state. As shown in *Figure 1: Overview of state education agency's requirements for field experiences offered in teacher preparation programs* this state's education agency required preservice teachers seeking initial classroom teacher certification to complete 30 clock-hours of field experiences (Texas Education Agency, 2016).

State Education Agency Requirements for Field Experiences

Definitions
Clock-hours: The actual number of hours spent in required field-based experiences.
Field Experiences: Introductory experiences that involve reflective observations of educational activities within early childhood through Grade 12 classrooms in state-accredited schools.

Teacher Preparation Program Delivery
Teacher preparation programs will provide field experiences that are continuous and relevant, in a variety of school settings among diverse students, and include observations and demonstrations of effective teaching and learning practices.

Field Experience Requirements
- Must be a minimum of 30 clock-hours
  - Up to 15 clock-hours may be earned through use of technology-based methods
- Must be completed prior to student teaching
- Must take place in authentic settings at public schools accredited by the state education agency
- Must present instruction delivered by a classroom teacher who carries appropriate teaching certifications
- Must encompass actual students whose identities are concealed
- Must occur in content or grade-level specific classrooms
- Must include recorded written reflections

Figure 1: Overview of state education agency's requirements for field experiences offered in teacher preparation programs.

Research Design

The purpose of the study was to ascertain current ways in which literacy teacher educators incorporate field experiences during literacy coursework. The study used a cross-sectional survey design to collect qualitative data from literacy teacher educators at a single moment in time (Creswell, 2012). Using a cross-sectional survey design provided a quick and efficient way to retrieve a snapshot of the current preparation practices that literacy teacher educators use to train future teachers (Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Research Sample

The study utilized purposeful sampling to achieve a homogenous sample of participants (Creswell, 2012). A pool of participants was created using the following systematic process. First, a listing of the 67 state-approved, university-based teacher preparation programs was obtained from the state education

agency's website. Next, comprehensive web searches were conducted on each university's website to identify faculty members who teach literacy-focused courses for preservice teachers. During each web search, publically accessible information, such as class schedules, course syllabi, and departmental websites, were consulted. These efforts resulted in the creation of a database that consisted of 457 participant pool members.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a researcher-created electronic survey developed in Google Forms. The survey instrument consisted of closed- and open-ended questions that were developed in alignment with professional standards for literacy professionals (International Reading Association, 2010). Closed-ended questions asked survey respondents to rate their views of preservice teacher preparedness with the desired behaviors, knowledge, and skills of novice classroom teachers. Open-ended questions allowed survey respondents to provide detailed information concerning specific preparation practices they use to promote preservice teachers' development of the desired behaviors, knowledge, and skills of novice classroom teachers.

After completing your educator preparation program, how prepared are literacy professionals with: *	Not At All Prepared	Slightly Prepared	Somewhat Prepared	Very Prepared	Extremely Prepared
Understanding major theories and empirical research with literacy?	○	○	○	○	○
Understanding the historically shared knowledge of the profession and changes over time in the perceptions of literacy?	○	○	○	○	○
Understanding the role of professional judgment and practical knowledge for improving all students' literacy achievement?	○	○	○	○	○

Specifically, how do you promote literacy professionals' understandings with theoretical and evidence-based foundations of literacy instruction?

Your answer

Figure 2: Example of a closed- and open-ended question from the survey instrument.

An example of a closed- and open-ended question from the survey instrument is shown in *Figure 2: Example of a closed- and open-ended question from the survey instrument*. To achieve the purpose of the study, qualitative data related to field experiences were retrieved and analyzed.

Data Collection and Analysis

A pilot test was performed to ensure that the electronic survey instrument collected the intended data, was technologically sound, and understandable to respondents. Twenty individuals who were teacher educators affiliated with teacher preparation programs in other states participated in the pilot test. These individuals provided feedback, which resulted in minor edits to the survey to enhance clarity with wording. After these edits were made, the electronic survey instrument was emailed to all participant pool members listed in the database. The survey period was kept open for five months in order to provide sufficient time for respondents to participate. Participation was tracked in the participant pool database, and reminder emails were sent once a month to encourage participation among members who had not yet responded.

After the survey period ended, completed surveys were screened for any references made about field experiences. These references were considered relevant data for the present study and were retrieved for data analysis. Two cycles of coding were used to organize data into categories and identify emerging patterns (Saldaña, 2016). In the first cycle, data were reviewed line-by-line and segmented into preliminary concepts. These preliminary concepts were labeled with in vivo codes, such as "observe an experienced teacher," "work one-to-one with struggling readers," "complete case study of an individual student," and "work with small groups." In the second cycle, focused coding was used to cluster similarly coded data together as separate categories. These categories represented observations that preservice teachers conduct in elementary and secondary classrooms, as well as interactive activities that preservice teachers complete with actual students.

During data analysis, the lead researcher conducted both cycles of coding independently. Throughout both cycles, the lead researcher made analytic memos while coding to document thoughts, reflections, and understandings (Saldaña, 2016). Once the lead researcher completed analyses, all relevant documents (i.e., raw data, coded data, analytic memos) were shared with the second and third researchers so they could perform separate audits. Then, all three researchers met as a research team to review interpretations and reconcile disagreements through discussion.

Findings

Data collection efforts resulted in 65 completed surveys, of which 42 surveys contained relevant data about field experiences that occurred in tandem with literacy coursework. These 42 respondents included four males and 38 females who were affiliated with university-based teacher preparation programs located at 17 private universities and 25 public universities. All 42 respondents were literacy teacher educators who had two or more years of experience preparing preservice teachers for teacher licensure in the following areas: Early childhood through preschool, elementary grade levels (i.e., Kindergarten - 6th Grade), middle school grade levels (i.e., 4th Grade - 8th Grade), and secondary grade levels (i.e., 9th Grade - 12th Grade).

Relevant data encompassed 2,078 words. During data analysis, three categories emerged that represented a range of field experiences preservice teachers complete prior to student teaching in their respective teacher preparation programs. As shown in *Figure 3*: *Overview of the three categories that emerged during data analysis*, these categories were Observing Literacy Instruction, Leading Literacy Instruction with Individual Students, and Leading Literacy Instruction with Small Groups. An overview of each category, along with verbatim quotes from respondents, is provided below.
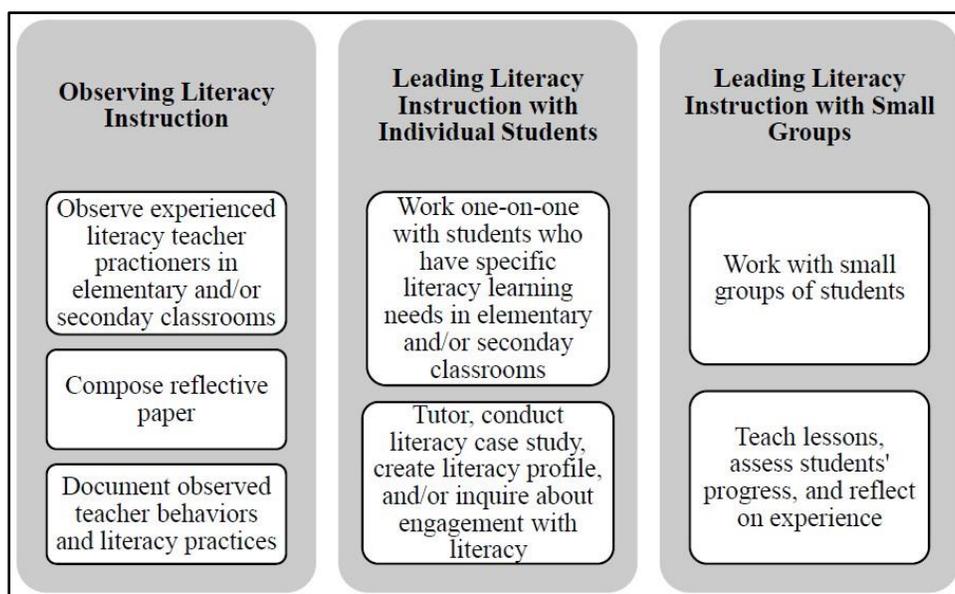

Figure 3: Overview of the three categories that emerged during data analysis.

Observing Literacy Instruction

Within the Observing Literacy Instruction category, respondents identified specific field experiences where preservice teachers observe literacy instruction

delivered by an experienced teacher in local schools. Respondents indicated a wide range of time periods for literacy teacher observations (between eight and 80 hours) and noted some specific criteria (i.e., elementary or secondary classroom, observe eight hours of reading lessons and eight hours of writing lessons). One respondent noted that preservice teachers composed a reflective paper about their observation experiences, while another respondent specified that preservice teachers documented observed literacy behaviors and practices of teachers.

Leading Literacy Instruction with Individual Students

Within the Leading Literacy Instruction with Individual Students category, respondents identified specific field experiences where preservice teachers led literacy instruction with individual students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade classrooms. During these types of field experiences, preservice teachers were paired with struggling readers, English language learners, or students who had identified disabilities. Respondents noted that while working with students individually, preservice teachers engaged in structured tutoring, conducted a literacy case study, created a literacy profile, or interviewed students about their literacy practices and reading preferences. Among these possible activities, respondents provided the most detail for the literacy case study. For example, one respondent explicated:

> For the [literacy] case study, preservice teachers administer reading and writing attitude surveys, running records, miscue analyses, and other assessments to identify learning levels for a particular student. Based on the results of these assessments, preservice teachers make instructional and curriculum decisions and design instruction to address the student's strengths and needs.

After conducting the case study, respondents noted that preservice teachers composed a summary of the experience, wrote a full report, or disseminated their findings to school officials or parents.

With these types of field experiences, it was evident that respondents provided a great deal of structure to ensure preservice teachers were exposed to a variety of classroom settings at different grade levels. For instance, one respondent explained how they provided preservice teachers with opportunities to work equally with learners of various ages:

> Our [preservice teachers] spend a total of ten hours (one hour per week for ten weeks) working one-on-one with a kindergartener who is performing below the expected grade level in reading. They pre-assess skills, design and implement instruction based on the student's needs, and then post-

assess skills. [Preservice teachers] also spend ten hours with a student in the intermediate grades who is performing below the expected grade level in reading. They conduct a number of literacy assessments and then analyze the data to determine the student's strengths and needs.

Another respondent mentioned that preservice teachers were sometimes placed in classrooms that focused on content areas other than literacy. However, this respondent contended, "Literacy is the staple within all content; therefore, as our [preservice teachers] tutor students, there is opportunity."

Leading Literacy Instruction with Small Groups

Within this category, respondents identified specific field experiences where preservice teachers lead literacy instruction with small groups of students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade classrooms. During these types of field experiences, preservice teachers practiced literacy teaching, assessment, and reflection by planning and implementing lessons that addressed the state's mandated curriculum standards and developed literacy skills at varied levels. Respondents recounted that small group literacy instruction primarily focused upon balanced literacy components, including comprehension strategies, word study, guided reading, reading aloud, and writing.

Some respondents reported that they coordinated these types of field experiences with high levels of structure. For example, one respondent stated, "I provide assignments in which [preservice teachers] will work with students to implement activities and lessons." Another respondent arranged for preservice teachers to first observe an experienced teacher deliver a guided reading lesson before they led small group guided reading lessons. Similarly, a different respondent described a set of writing lessons that preservice teachers were required to implement with small groups of students from three different grade levels:

> Preservice teachers complete writing labs where they teach a small group of students for two consecutive days. During each writing lab, preservice teachers use a mentor text to support students' writing. Students create a rough draft and final draft during the two-day writing lab.

Conversely, other respondents reported that they maintained low levels of structure with these types of field experiences. For example, one respondent indicated that preservice teachers "must teach at least one literacy lesson." Another respondent shared, "Preservice teachers are in the field two full days per week. Currently, there are no specific requirements for activities to be fulfilled while they are in the field." In the same manner, a different respondent disclosed

that these types of field experiences were not uniform throughout their teacher preparation program.

Discussion and Implications

Findings from the present study have presented a snapshot of current ways in which literacy teacher educators incorporate field experiences during literacy coursework. By employing a cross-sectional survey design, relevant data were collected from a sample of experienced literacy teacher educators who were affiliated with various university-based teacher preparation programs located in a single Southern state. Through data analyses, social constructivism provided a theoretical lens to understand better the three categories of field experiences that emerged. In general, preservice teachers observed literacy teachers in local schools during early field experiences and led literacy instruction for individual students and small groups of students during later field experiences. At an initial glance, these findings appear to align with a typical continuum of field experiences offered during literacy teacher preparation (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2006).

Closer examination of these findings, however, echoed ILA's (2015) concerns with field experiences in literacy teacher preparation. ILA noted that state education agencies typically have a set number of field experience hours that preservice teachers must complete, but they have no specific criteria for literacy-focused field experiences. As shown in Figure 1, the state education agency in the present study delineated a specific number of field experience hours that preservice teachers must complete and some particulars. Yet, there were no explicit requirements for preservice teachers to observe exemplary literacy teachers or engage in evidence-based literacy practices. Although the field experience requirements of this state's education agency pertain to initial teacher licensure in all content areas and grade levels, literacy is an inherent aspect for all learning (Kane, 2017; Wolsey & Lapp, 2017).

Findings from the present study have also pointed to some incongruences between reported field experiences and recommendations found in extant literature. For example, there were no mentions of preservice teachers leading literacy instruction in whole group situations (Rosaen et al., 2016), and no specific references were made concerning preservice teacher placement in rural (Ajayi, 2014), suburban (Johnson, 2010), or urban (Lazar, 2018) school contexts. Findings also revealed that preservice teachers primarily worked with struggling readers while leading literacy instruction in one-on-one and small group situations, rather than working with students who represent a wide range of cultural and linguistic differences (Xu, 2000) and exceptionalities (Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014). Furthermore, there were ambiguities in how preservice teachers were supervised and mentored during reported field experiences. The

precise roles of literacy teacher educators and classroom teachers during field experiences were not clear (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2006), nor were the ways in which preservice teachers were prepared to conduct effective classroom observations (Young & Bender-Slack, 2011). Additionally, no information was given that described how mentors supported preservice teachers' professional growth with coaching strategies (Husbye et al., 2018), demonstrations of teaching techniques (Linek et al., 1999), debriefing discussions (Harlin, 1999), or the provision of feedback (Fang & Ashley, 2004). Moreover, many reported field experiences did not appear to be closely aligned with literacy teacher preparation coursework, thereby signaling a disconnection between university- and field-based learning experiences (Zeichner, 2010).

Lacina and Block (2011) purported that effective teacher preparation programs offer a succession of well-planned, literacy-focused field experiences. As preservice teachers engage with field experiences that are judiciously aligned with coursework and closely mentored (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Clift & Brady, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2006a, 2006b; Hammerness et al., 2005; Zeichner, 1996, 2010; Zeichner & Conklin, 2008), they enter student teaching more prepared to assume full teaching responsibilities during the entire school day (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2006). Since findings from the present study have uncovered incongruences and ambiguities, they affirm the need for literacy teacher educators to scrutinize the design and structure of literacy-focused field experiences offered in their respective preparation programs. Literacy teacher educators must ensure that preservice teachers have frequent opportunities to practice how to translate the professional behaviors, knowledge, and skills they learn about inside university classrooms "in ways that will make a difference" with real students in authentic school contexts (Fang & Ashley, 2004, p. 52). With this goal in mind, literacy teacher educators must refine literacy-focused field experiences to complement a coherent curriculum, employ strong partnerships, and support preservice teachers' growth as reflective practitioners.

While the preceding implications focused on literacy teacher educators, findings from the present study have also suggested the need for administrators of teacher preparation programs to support the work of literacy teacher educators. Preparing preservice teachers to become effective literacy teachers is complex, intense, and time-consuming (Kosnik et al., 2015). In addition to teaching literacy-focused courses, literacy teacher educators attend to a myriad of additional responsibilities within their department, college, university, local schools, community, and profession (Kosnik, Meena, Dharamshi, Miyata, & Beck, 2013). Although literacy teacher educators enhance their preparation practices through informal self-reflective exercises (Griffith, Bauml, & Quebec-Fuentes, 2016), it is essential that they are also supported with more formalized professional development activities (Kosnik et al., 2015). Thus, administrators of

teacher preparation programs must provide literacy teacher educators with the necessary funding and time to develop and refine their preparation practices, as well as study the teaching practices of their graduates.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

As in the case of many qualitative research studies, there were methodological limitations in the present study that warrant caution with generalizability of findings. Although the participant pool database contained a substantial number of prospective respondents, the number of actual survey respondents was low. Participation may have been impacted by outdated and inaccurate information obtained during web searches, and potential participants may have hesitant to participate in electronic research requests (Saleh & Bista, 2017). However, those who participated were experienced literacy professionals who contributed informative insights. Future research studies should continue this area of inquiry more comprehensively. Possible follow-up studies might include systematic case study examinations of literacy-focused field experiences, with a particular focus on how they influence learning among preservice teachers. Additionally, future studies should be conducted that identify examples of coherent curricula, techniques to establish and maintain strong partnerships, and tools to support preservice teachers' growth as reflective practitioners.

Suggestions for Strengthening Field Experiences

Impactful literacy practices are nurtured amid literacy communities that include multiple stakeholders: literacy teacher educators, preservice teachers, school district personnel, school-aged students and their caregivers, teacher preparation program colleagues, and the literacy teacher educator community at large (ILA, 2018). Fostering a strong and tight-knit literacy community empowers stakeholders to help and support one another. As stakeholders interact and engage in actions that strengthen literacy teacher preparation, all stakeholders in the literacy community stand to benefit. As an illustration, classroom teachers and literacy teacher educators work collaboratively to tailor instruction that meets the literacy learning needs of students in the classroom and provides preservice teachers with enriching professional learning opportunities.

With this in mind, literacy teacher educators must carefully coordinate and strategically plan a coherent literacy curriculum of coursework and field experiences with others in their literacy community (DeGraff, Schmidt, & Waddell, 2015). For example, literacy teacher educators should facilitate curricular planning sessions with classroom teachers who will host preservice teachers during field experiences. During these planning sessions, literacy teacher educators and classroom teachers work together to design field experiences that support preservice teachers' ability to "draw meaningful connections between the

theoretical concepts covered in their coursework and the practical realties of working with children" (Kosnik, Menna, Dharamshi, & Beck, 2018, p. 113). By clearly communicating with one another, literacy teacher educators and classroom teachers cultivate precise understandings of their role, expectations for interactions, and effective strategies that support the professional growth of preservice teachers (Gut, Beam, Henning, Cochran, & Knight, 2014).

  Following curricular planning sessions, literacy teacher educators could schedule periodic conversations with their literacy community partners to discuss logistical considerations related to field experiences. These may include conversations with school personnel to identify students, appropriate days and times that avoid unnecessary disruptions, potential meeting spaces, and procedures for accessing student data and resources (DeGraff et al., 2015). Depending on how field experiences are organized, conversations about logistics may also be needed with students and their caregivers to communicate information about timing and meeting places.

  In order to maximize potential benefits associated with carefully structured field experiences, preservice teachers must "reflect upon their instructional practice and how it connects to or is grounded in their beliefs" (Masuda & Ebersole, 2013, p. 53). While engaged in field experiences, it is altogether too easy for preservice teachers to become entangled in learning how to manage internal and external mediating influences (Masuda & Ebersole, 2013; Scales et al., 2017). Therefore, literacy teacher educators and their colleagues must work collectively to strengthen reflective practices throughout their respective teacher preparation program.

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