Toward a Balance Between Theory and Practice: 
Early Field Experience in Teacher Education

If early field experiences are to offer more than the opportunity for the student to observe what takes place in the classroom and to avoid serving only as apprenticeships, as so many student teaching experiences do (Price, 1972), participants must have a base of prior knowledge and theory to relate to what they observe or encounter in the classroom. Why the classroom teacher does what she does will have more meaning when viewed with a background in the history and philosophy of education, learning theory, human growth and development, and other theoretical courses. Similarly, why learners do what they do or why they respond the way they do can be better understood in the context of knowledge learned through related courses.

Erdman (1983) points out the need for educators to ensure that attention is given to connecting theory and practice in field experience when she states that:

Quality experiences entail an integration of theory and practice at the level of the expressed purpose of the teacher educator and in terms of their meanings to pre-service teachers. Given these criteria, it should be recognized that the quality of many early field experience programs is poor due to their inattention to the connectedness of theory and practice. (p. 27)

Providing a number of field experiences before the student undertakes the full-time student teaching internship or practicum is common in teacher preparation programs throughout American higher education (Moore, 1979). Moore reports, in fact, that the number of required hours of direct observation and participation in the school classroom setting as a pre-requisite for student teaching is increasing.

The idea of early field experiences (EFE) has captured the imagination of program planners, especially those who believe that there should be a closer blend of the theoretical and the practical in education curricula. Such ideas have been the driving force behind the expansion of EFE in nearly all teacher education programs in the United States. (Bowyer & Dyke, 1988)

With the increase in emphasis on early field experiences, care must be taken to ensure that the student is prepared to benefit maximally from the opportunity. For example, participants in field experiences who do not have a knowledge base about the school as an institution, the student as a learner, and the teaching methods are not likely to benefit greatly from the experience regardless of how extensive the experience might be. This position is supported by Lanier and Little (1986) who found in their review of research on field experiences that "...its value is dependent on prospective teachers' being properly prepared to learn from it" (p. 551).

The need for a carefully described curriculum which provides pre-requisite knowledge, contrived teaching experiences on campus, proper sequencing of experiences, and balance between formal instruction and field experience is well stated in a National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education report released by AACTE (1985):

Neither formal instruction nor field work alone is sufficient preparation for the professional teacher. Quality teacher education programs do not have a mechanical separation of classwork and field experiences; instead, field work and on-campus laboratory experiences should accompany all classes, and classes or seminars should accompany all field work, such as student teaching or internships. Such programs are coherent: early classes,
laboratories, and field work anticipate what is to come, and later classes and experiences expand what came before. (p. 12)

In view of the importance of adequate preparation for field experiences, the authors will set out in this paper to draw from the literature information about campus-based and field-based early laboratory experiences that would prepare students to benefit more fully from their teacher training program and their full-time student teaching assignment. Program, personnel and administrative guidelines will then be developed that, if implemented would ensure a high level of quality in early teacher preparation field experiences. One university's experiences with finding a balance between theory and practice in early field experiences in teacher education will be shared, along with their successful application of NCATE Category II criteria - Relationships to the World of Practice.

References


