Teaching Experience Days as Field Experience for Elementary Teacher Candidates

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Abstract

Elementary education majors’ (n = 143) perceptions of Teaching Experience Days (TEDs) were investigated. TEDs requires a full day of independent teaching along with a pre- and post-conference. Awarding of substitute pay for participation can occur under specific conditions. Researchers collected data using the Teaching Experience Days Questionnaire, which ascertains perceptions of TEDs regarding teaching strategies, content knowledge, school operations, behavior management skills, and knowledge of student development. Data in the form of frequencies and percentages was calculated. The majority (at least 69%) viewed TEDs as effective in all five areas; highest agreement (82%) was in behavior management and lowest agreement (69%) was in school operations.

Keywords: teacher preparation, preservice teachers, substitute teachers
Teaching Experience Days as Field Experience for Elementary Teacher Candidates

In the last decade, any number of reports indicated that large numbers of teachers choose to leave the profession early in their careers (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Hare & Heap, 2001; Johnson, 2001; Pipho, 1998). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1999), less than 36% of new teachers reported feeling “very well prepared” to implement curriculum and performance standards in the classroom. Similarly, less than 30% felt prepared to integrate technology into instruction, and less than 20% felt prepared to meet the needs of diverse students (NCES, 1999). Darling-Hammond (2007) noted, “Disparities in access to well-qualified teachers are large and growing worse” (p. 323). The shortcomings of a traditional teacher preparation program contribute to the continuous teacher turnover currently plaguing the profession (Haberman, 2005; Kent, Feldman, & Hayes, 2009). Recruiting, preparing, and retaining teachers for academically challenging and diverse situations is a dilemma for every institution involved in teacher preparation today (Thomson & Smith, 2005). The answer may lie in determining how to best integrate the empirically based pedagogy of teacher education while being practically oriented in order to graduate successful teachers committed to staying in the profession (Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006).

Field experiences prior to and during courses in pedagogical methods are prevalent throughout teacher education programs (Applegate & Lasley, 1986) for providing students the opportunity to bridge theory and practice (Hooks & Randolph, 2004; Jacobs, 2001). Despite current efforts to stimulate the transfer of a university-obtained knowledge base to a classroom setting (Korthagen & Kessels, 1999), the separation of theory and practice throughout traditional teacher preparation programs is one reason for new teachers’ limited abilities. Keiny (1994) stated, “Teachers’ education should emphasize understanding not merely on the theoretical level, but as an integration of theory and action” (p. 158). Other criticisms included the length of time it takes teacher candidates to reach the classroom and the sacrifice of employment opportunity to complete program requirements (USDE, 2002). Carefully examining the role and structure of field experiences in teacher preparation programs is necessary in determining how they may best be reformed to better prepare today’s teacher candidates.

Traditionally, field experiences have not been a priority in many teacher preparation programs (Wiggins, Follo, & Eberly, 2007). In many programs, field experiences tend to be sporadic and brief, lacking specificities and reflective opportunities that guide candidates in what it is they are to be learning, and are not connected to other components of the program (Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Compounding the issue of inadequate field experience requirements is the difficulty in identifying and placing candidates with teachers who model instructional practices that focus on meeting the needs of all students through current, research-based teaching strategies, which is essential if candidates are to observe instruction that reflects current reform efforts and university-advocated instructional practices (Barnett, Harwood, Keating, & Saam, 2002).

In examining the literature, consistent variables of effective field experience programs emerged. Regardless of inherent logistical challenges, multiple field experience locations must
be strategically selected to provide candidates numerous and varied opportunities to work with diverse groups of students. Field experiences must also begin with introductory education courses and continue throughout a candidate’s teacher methodological coursework, scaffolding the types of interactions in which candidates engage. Additionally, the voices of all stakeholders—principals, teachers, university faculty, and candidates—are critical for constant refinement and improvement. Although the commitment of all members is necessary for a quality program, the cooperation of the classroom teacher is of particular importance (Clarke, Triggs & Nielsen, 2014).

The cooperating teacher who guides and supports the candidate throughout the field experience is crucial to the success of the experience (Graham, 2006). Professional organizations, such as the Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) and the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), support this notion through the development of criteria for selecting cooperating teachers to accompany those regulating the selection of field experience sites. The goal is for candidates to merge their conceptual understanding of teaching with the functional knowledge of in-service teachers through a process that is about and derived from practice, with opportunity to reflect on that practice under the guidance of a reflective, experienced practitioner (Harrison, Dymoke, & Pell, 2006). In best-case scenarios, this process also extends the cooperating teacher’s knowledge base as she incorporates new strategies and ideas introduced by the candidate.

Another important factor emerges when the attitudes of the stakeholders are considered. A great deal of the success of a candidate’s experiences depends on personal attitudes and beliefs, or dispositions (NCATE, 2002). As these dispositions are shaped, the beliefs and experiences of the cooperating teacher, along with the relationships between the university supervisor, cooperating teacher, and candidate, play a vital role in the success of the experience (Borko & Mayfield, 1995; Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Korthagen, et al., 2006; Zeichner, 2010).

**Teaching Experience Days**

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education established the National Awards Program for Effective Teacher Preparation identifying five key elements among the top four programs. An effective P-12 partnership where cooperating districts provided feedback about the college’s teacher preparation program and helped to enhance the quality of field experiences was one of these elements (Dean, Lauer, & Urquhart, 2005). As leaders in the public schools and colleges of education join forces, educating future teachers becomes a collaborative effort, each relying on the insight of the other. The need to prepare candidates for diverse populations of academically challenging students while providing quality instruction to public school students that may otherwise experience a “teacher-less” day (due to the limited availability of qualified substitutes) resulted in the development of Teaching Experience Days. This was a joint effort between a university and local school districts in south Alabama.

**The Beginning**

Teaching Experience Days (TEDs) provide candidates with diverse clinical field experiences in multiple classroom settings with levels of increasing responsibility. The program,
as an added benefit for the district, simultaneously allows local school schools to address their current lack of qualified substitute teachers. The TEDs program, a response to initiatives being implemented nation-wide that require increased field experiences, is intended to engage students in best practices by providing a variety of early, rich, and deep professional experiences for teacher education candidates. The TEDs program also represents a potential solution for meeting emerging state certification standards requiring the implementation of a responsive model for collaborating with local school districts.

**Engaging in a Teaching Experience Day**

To complete a TED, candidates must plan with a host teacher in the same school where they are completing their course-related field experience. TEDs, however, do not require that candidates necessarily work with anyone other than their assigned cooperating teacher. In fact, TEDs usually occur with the assigned cooperating teacher. Thus, the candidate would be in the same class with the same students while the teacher is elsewhere (i.e., in the school at a meeting, taking a sick day, attending professional development off-campus, and participating in other similar activities). As candidates gain confidence in their teaching abilities, they might teach in other classes. While not the primary purpose, TEDs may also serve the critical objective of exposing candidates to a greater variety of classrooms.

The pre-teaching conference constitutes the planning phase. During the pre-teaching conference, the host teacher should review the following items with the candidate: 1) all lesson plans the host teacher developed that the candidate will use to teach, 2) instructional materials and teaching resources related to the planned lessons, and 3) other vital information to help ensure the success of the candidate’s upcoming teaching experience. The teaching experience includes the candidate teaching for the entire school day during the host teacher’s absence, according to arrangements outlined in the pre-teaching conference. As the candidate engages in the TED, the host teacher, cooperating teacher, instructional specialist (e.g., reading coach or math coach), building principal, or other suitable on-site professional is responsible for the supervision.

Following completion of the TED, the candidate meets with the host teacher for a post-teaching conference. The purpose of this conference is to reflect on what was successful, discuss difficulties encountered, and obtain feedback from a veteran teacher regarding general observations. Additionally, a completed *Teaching Experience Validation Form* (see Appendix A) documents each TED. Both the candidate who completed the TED and the host teacher in whose classroom the TED occurred sign the validation form before and after the actual day of teaching.

**Opportunity for Compensation**

The Teaching Experience Days program, a result of a university and local school district collaboration, allows teacher candidates to receive substitute teacher pay as they engage in TEDs when certain conditions exist. It should be clear, however, that TEDs have no required relationship with substitute teaching in any form, paid or unpaid. Candidates majoring in elementary education are required to complete a minimum of 10 Teaching Experience Days.
during their teacher preparation program (2 days during the first methods course block, 3 days during the second methods course block, and 5 days during the student teaching semester). It has always been permissible for candidates to work, either as substitute teachers or in any other capacity, as long as their employment does not interfere with their participation in and ability to complete all requirements of the degree program. Nothing in the TEDs program requires them to be substitute teachers or specifies particular school districts for which they may serve as substitutes. Candidates employed as substitute teachers may use that experience to satisfy the TEDs requirement if they meet all other conditions of the TEDs program.

As with any substitute-teaching situation, candidates can qualify for pay as substitute teachers after meeting the following conditions: 1) they received appropriate training from the school district, 2) voluntarily avail themselves of the opportunity, and 3) the school district chooses to employ them for that purpose. TEDs require additional supervision above that of a substitute teacher, and there is no connection between TEDS and any compensation except as agreed between the school district and the candidate. Critically, the requirements of the TEDs program may be satisfied whether or not candidates choose to also work as substitute teachers and whether or not the district chooses to employ them in that role.

Integration of TEDs and Field Experiences

Engaging in TEDs adds no additional days to the candidates’ field experience schedule, but it does provide a variation in the type of experience the candidates will engage in for a portion of time. Consequently, there should be no scheduling conflicts because of a candidate’s participation in the TEDs program. Further, TEDs provide the potential for addressing issues relating to best practices, as candidates are able to collaborate with more professionals in their field and examine how instructional and organizational elements are organized and implemented in a variety of classrooms. TEDs allow for another layer of site and university supervision as members of the school community (e.g., principal, academic coaches, or special education teachers) have additional opportunities to work with teacher candidates.

TEDs provide teacher candidates with a variety of field experiences throughout the junior and senior year without compromising the power of intense field experience in a single classroom and opportunity to learn from a pre-determined master teacher. Based on the host teacher’s lesson plans, candidates engage in instruction for public school students, thereby enhancing teaching experience for the candidate and continuous learning for the student. Finally, under certain circumstances, the candidate receives responsive compensation.

Evaluating the Pilot

Researchers investigated the perceived benefit of elementary teacher candidates’ participation in Teaching Experience Days (TEDs) the first semester of implementation using a quantitative, descriptive research model. Specifically, the research questions were as follows:

1. To what extent did completion of TEDs contribute to teacher candidates’ knowledge of elementary curriculum content?
2. To what extent did completion of TEDs contribute to teacher candidates’ abilities to deliver instruction effectively and knowledge of teaching strategies?

3. To what extent did the completion of TEDs contribute to teacher candidates’ classroom management abilities?

4. To what extent did the completion of TEDs contribute to teacher candidates’ familiarity with school-wide operations?

5. To what extent did the completion of TEDs contribute to teacher candidates’ awareness/understanding of developmental variation among students across grade levels?

Method

Participants

Participants were 143 teacher candidates (134 females and 9 males) in a College of Education at a university located in the southeastern United States. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools classifies the university as a Level VI institution, and it the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching identifies it as a Doctoral/Research Intensive University. All participants were in upper-division education courses within a program leading to Class B teaching certificate in Elementary Education (K-6). Eighty-four participants were juniors, and fifty-nine were seniors. Eighty percent (115) were 19- to 29-year-olds. The number of participants in each age range was as follows: 91 between 19-24 years, 24 between 25-29 years, 14 between 30-34 years, 5 between 35-39, 7 between 40-44 years, and 1 between 45-49 and 1 50 years or older. Although most (106) participants were white, ethnicities also represented were black (32), Asian (2), and Hispanic (1). While consecutive semester field placements are a requirement of the teacher preparation program piloting TEDs, 141 participants were in the first semester of their field placement classroom. Distribution of participants among grade levels is as follows: 16 kindergarten, 31 first grade, 12 second grade, 18 third grade, 30 fourth grade, and 36 fifth grade.

Materials

The Teaching Experience Days Questionnaire (TEDQ) is a two-part, self-report instrument developed by the researchers to obtain candidates’ perceptions of the effectiveness of their Teaching Experience Days experience. The first part obtains basic demographic information (gender, age, classification, and ethnicity) along with details related to the location (school and grade level) and process followed when completing TEDs. The second part contains 10 items that ascertain participants’ perceptions of the TED program’s effect on knowledge of curriculum content, teaching strategies, overall school operations, developmental differences of students, and classroom management abilities. For the purpose of ascertaining reliability, a pair (1-4, 2-8, 3-6, 5-9, and 7-10) of reversely stated items addresses each of the five areas investigated. Participants used a fully anchored four-point rating scale, ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree,” for responding to each item. A panel of four elementary teacher educators determined content validity on the TEDQ. Each area expert assessed the extent to
which the instrument accurately and completely measured the intended constructs. A group of graduate education majors determined face validity on the TEDQ. Adjustments occurred based on the feedback from both groups resulting in the final version of the instrument.

**Design and Procedure**

The research consisted of a one-group comparison posttest only design (Johnson & Christensen, 2010), where participants were measured upon the dependent variable of participation in the Teaching Experience Days program. Researchers used the survey method of data collection because the number of subjects is relatively high, and survey method research provides a numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population (Creswell, 2003). All participants completed the Teaching Experience Days Questionnaire (TEDQ) during a regularly scheduled university course the last week of the semester. While the nature of self-report presents the possibility that participants may have been tempted to respond as they deemed ‘expected’. This risk was minimal since participants completed the TEDQ independent of any interaction and all responses remained anonymous.

Limitations include limited generalizability since participants were a convenience sample. Additionally, the inability to control extraneous variables, such as school placement and host teacher as well as the timing and quality of the conferences, may have contributed to differences in perceptions among participants. Another factor possibly influencing perception is the actual number of TEDs completed. For example, some participants exceeded the required minimum number of TEDs, with three participants completing as many as five TEDs during the semester. Using the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS), researchers calculated frequencies and percentages for quantitative data (demographics and item responses) from the TEDQ.

**Results**

Participants reported that most TEDs occurred in their assigned field experience classroom, rather than in other classrooms at their assigned school. Specifically, 131 participants (92%) completed their first TED in their assigned classroom, with 113 (79%) for their second TED. Forty-three (30%) completed a third TED in their assigned classroom; however, a third TED was only required of the 54 seniors, which would be (80%). As shown in Table 1, both pre- and post-conferences most often occurred within one day of the TED for all conferences (186 out of 329 pre-TED and 133 out of 334 post-TED) completed.
Table 1

Timing of TEDs Pre- and Post-Conferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-Conference Timing</th>
<th>Post-Conference Timing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TED</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| TOTAL | 327 | 23 | 186 | 109 | 12 | 99 | 133 | 91 | 8 |

Participants agreed with the positively stated items on the TEDQ, indicating a perceived positive effect of TEDs participation in the areas of effect on knowledge of curriculum content (79%), teaching strategies (79%), overall school operations (69%), developmental differences of students (74%), and classroom management abilities (82%). Table 2 presents results for positively stated item.

Table 2

TEDQ Positive Statement Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. TEDS increased my knowledge of general elementary curriculum content.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I developed better teaching strategies as a result of TEDS.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I was more familiar with the overall school operations (i.e., facilities, support personnel, and standard procedures) due to TEDS.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. TEDS increased my understanding of the wide-range of developmental variation among elementary students.</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. TEDS improved my behavior management skills.</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Likewise, participants disagreed with the negatively stated items on the TEDQ, indicating a perceived positive effect of TEDs participation in all five areas -- curriculum content (67%), teaching strategies (66%), overall school operations (73%), developmental differences of students (54%), and classroom management abilities (64%). Table 3 presents results for negatively stated items.

Table 3 TEDQ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Statement Responses</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. TEDS had no effect on my content knowledge.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. My teaching strategies were not affected by TEDS.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. TEDS has no effect on my familiarity with the school environment.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. My understanding of student development across grade levels was unaffected by TEDS.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My ability to effectively manage student behavior was not positively affected by TEDS.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Findings suggest that candidates generally perceived TEDs as effective. Overall, the majority (at least 69%) viewed TEDs as effective in the five areas explored; the highest percentage of agreement (82%) was in behavior management, and the lowest percentage of agreement (69%) was in school operations. It is noteworthy that candidates perceived TEDs as beneficial in improving knowledge and skills related to behavior management since this is often an area of difficulty for preservice and novice teachers. Ultimately, the data indicated that this sample of undergraduates viewed TEDs as enriching their preparation for their teaching careers by providing another dimension to established field experiences. Additional research that examines the perception of cooperating teachers and school administrators regarding the effectiveness of TEDs needs to occur.

The availability of well-qualified teachers can be critical in determining students’ academic success (Ferguson, 1991; Darling-Hammond, Holtman, Gatlin, & Heilig, 2005). Thus, preparing teachers who view themselves as competent and capable of meeting the needs of today’s challenging student population is essential in order to reach the goal of improving student achievement. Korthagen, Loughran, and Russell (2006) identify deep, rich field experiences as the best possible means of providing this preparation. For this and other reasons, many universities are exploring non-traditional approaches to embedding a variety of rich classroom experiences within their teacher preparation programs. Teaching Experience Days
represents a collaborative effort between one university and local school districts to provide supplemental field experiences that appears to better prepare future teachers for the complexity inherent in educating twenty-first century students.

References


Appendix

Teaching Experience Day Validation Form
College of Education • University of South Alabama

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Student JAG #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Course (prefix/number/title) Associated with TED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Teacher</th>
<th>Subject or Grade Level</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pre-Teaching Conference

The purpose of the pre-teaching conference is to allow the USA candidate to review with the classroom teacher the lesson plan that will be implemented in satisfaction of the TEDs requirement. For each subject and class taught, the following specific elements will be included in the pre-teaching conference:

- Purpose of the lesson
- Candidate’s objectives for this TED
- Anticipated student learning outcomes
- Evaluation criteria for student learning
- Materials to be used
- Teaching strategies to be employed
- Relationship of TED experience to University coursework
- Teaching strategies to be employed

I herewith certify that I met with candidate identified above and reviewed the instructional plan to be implemented to meet the requirements of the Teaching Experience Days program.

(Student Signature) (Date)

(Teacher Signature) (Date)

Post-Teaching Conference

The purpose of the post-teaching conference is to evaluate the effectiveness of the Teaching Experience Day. The following specific elements will be included in the post-teaching conference:

- Candidate’s evaluation of the experience, including strengths and weaknesses of the candidate’s performance
- Changes that could be made for future improvements and lessons learned by the candidate to guide continued professional development
- Assessment of P-12 student behaviors and interactions during the lesson
- Effectiveness of the instruction

I herewith certify that I have met with the candidate identified above and conducted the post-teaching conference assessing the Teaching Experience Days requirement.

(Student Signature) (Date)

(Teacher Signature) (Date)