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# Non-traditional Alternatives to Field Education Observations Due to COVID – 19 Interruptions: Preservice Teachers' Perspectives

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has impacted how preservice teachers fulfill education preparation programs (EPPs) field education observation requirements for degree completion and licensure. Many EPPs have scrambled to develop alternatives to meet state credentialing requirements. Some EPPs allow preservice teachers to watch recordings of teachers conducting lessons, others are employing simulations, while others are developing novel approaches to meeting requirements. A university's college of education in West Texas partnered with its local Boys and Girls Clubs to allow preservice teachers and faculty to present *STEAMulation Saturday* mini-camps to young learners. This paper examines preservice teachers perspectives of participation in the college's non-traditional field education observation opportunity. Implications for improvement and continued use are examined.

**Introduction**

For decades, preservice teacher classroom field observations and student teaching have been standard requirements in American educator preparation programs as degree requirements. Educator preparation programs (EPPs) require student participation in field observations and student teaching to provide candidates with opportunities to apply what they have learned in pedagogy content courses, to gain authentic hands-on experience in real classrooms, and to work directly diverse learners in a supervised context (Cuenca 2020, Kim 2020). Typically, preservice teachers engage in field observations with teacher practitioners as guests, observing how teachers conduct classes and create learning experiences for students. Observing preservice teachers are allowed limited interaction with students, some are allowed to assist in presenting lessons under the host teacher's careful supervision. In many EEP programs, a field observation component is required in junior and senior level pedagogy courses. Student teaching is usually the culminating course in an undergraduate education or graduate school program leading to teacher education and certification (Ogawa and Wilkinson, 1997).

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic in Spring 2020 prevented many preservice teachers and student teachers from either beginning or completing their field observations and student teaching requirements. Many school districts, colleges, and universities either ended their spring 2020 semester early, or moved their courses to an online format. Fall 2020 began with many school districts, colleges, and universities attempting different approaches to accommodate preservice and student teacher needs. Some school districts began the school year by allowing university education preservice teachers and student teachers to participate directly on their campuses, while others declined to have non-district personnel enter their campuses. As a result, college and university educator preparation programs have had to devise other means to provide opportunities for students to meet degree and certification requirements. Some colleges and universities received permission from states to offer non-traditional instruction, including distance learning lessons, and observations obtained either remotely or through recorded video (Saenz-Armstrong 2020, Holdheide 2020).

*A possible alternative*

When preservice teachers at a University in West Texas were informed that due to increasing community COVID-19 pandemic outbreaks and parental concerns of non-school personnel interacting with children, they could no longer complete their field observations on campuses of local schools. Teacher education faculty were presented with a dilemma of how to accommodate preservice teachers' needs to have authentic field observation experiences. Some suggested that preservice teachers do what students in other university EEPs are doing, watching recordings of students in K-12 classrooms and write reflections of their observations (Cuenca 2020, Walsh 2020).

One of the authors of this article felt that preservice teachers would best obtain a more meaningful and authentic field observation experience if they were able to observe and interact with learners in a physical environment. He contacted the director of local Boys and Girls Clubs in the area to propose a partnership between them and the University's College of Education. One of the authors, a College of Education faculty member proposed offering preservice teachers an opportunity to, under faculty supervision, create STEAM lessons and present them to elementary and middle school aged children at several Boys and Girls Club locations in the area. The intent of the collaboration was to provide opportunities to and for preservice teachers to create STEAM lessons, practice classroom management skills, interact with elementary and middle school aged learners, and receive feedback from College of Education faculty. In addition, children who were not engaging in hands-on STEAM activities at their local schools would be provided with a unique opportunity to do so.

Having received authorization from the University's department of Curriculum and Instruction chair and College of Education dean, preservice teachers were invited to obtain field observation hours by participating in three *STEAMulation Saturday Mini Camps* at two Boys and Girls Clubs locations.

*Who were the participants?*

Participants were preservice students who were currently enrolled in science and mathematics instructional methods for K-6 students, and science and mathematics instructional methods for 7 – 12 students. The two methods courses provided students with strategies and best practices for providing science and mathematics instruction to K-12 learners. Students were taught how to develop age-appropriate lesson plans, incorporating technology, hands-on learning, and various learning strategies in preparation for their student teaching practicum. Although participants were seniors and graduate students in the science/mathematics methods courses, participation was open to any preservice student who wished to complete field observation hours working with live subjects.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this article is to determine preservice teachers' perceived impact of participating in a series of non-traditional alternative field observation experiences. It was assumed that the participating preservice teachers had engaged in field observations in other pedagogy courses prior to the COVID-19 pandemic disruption. It is suggested that faculty in education preparation programs will use the discussed perceptions of participants in this study to amend their field observation courses to meet the needs of COVID-19 impacted preservice teachers.

**Methods**

Preservice teachers who chose to participate in the non-traditional field observations were introduced to various STEAM activities by curriculum and instruction faculty. A faculty member from the special education department presented strategies for working with special needs learners. Preservice teachers, working collaboratively, developed STEAM lessons which they presented at six, two-hour long *STEAMulating Saturday Minicamps* for elementary and middle school students at two local Boys and Girls Club locations in a West Texas community. Activities were created that addressed chemical reactions, electricity, Newtonian forces, chemical, potential, and kinetic energy, graphing techniques, and computer applications. Preservice teachers practiced classroom management strategies that have been modeled by university faculty. A faculty member, who holds secondary Texas secondary science and mathematics certification, presented STEAM activities to the minicamp participants. Preservice teachers presented the remainder of the activities. Faculty members from the college of education mentored preservice teachers during the presentations and provided constructive feedback. At the conclusion of the six minicamps, preservice teachers wrote reflections discussing their perceptions of participating in alternative field experiences.

**Results and Discussion**

At the conclusion of the six minicamps, preservice teachers reflected about their experiences in this novel, non-traditional approach to gaining field observation experience. Participants were provided with reflection prompts to discuss. Here, the authors review perspectives from four preservice teachers. Participant A is a biology major who is pursuing teaching certification in conjunction with a science undergraduate degree. Participant B is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Education degree in elementary education. Participant C is a chemistry major pursuing teaching certification in conjunction with a science undergraduate degree. Participant D is an undergraduate pursuing a middle school teaching degree. All participants will student-teach during the next semester.

Participants were asked, "How has COVID-19 impacted your ability to participate in a required field observation".

*Participant A*

> "COVID-19 impacted my ability to participate in a field observation experience because most parents and public-school district staff were weary of having additional people in the classroom that could increase the chance of exposure. In addition, school districts were using online learning via zoom, google classroom, and other online tools but teachers and students were still trying to adjust to the change and adding a student teacher may have complicated the already complex situation. Unfortunately, I did not get to observe an experienced teacher teaching a full lecture to help me understand a traditional style of teaching".

*Participant B*

"I was looking forward to observing a public-school classroom, Due to covid-19, the school district shut down, and I could not complete those observation hours. My professor had a great idea of working with the city's Boys and Girls clubs on three different weekends and conducting a STEM camp".

*Participant C*

"My participation and ability to teach in my field experience was not severely affected".

*Participant D*

"My field experience was impacted by COVID-19 in more ways than one. Due to COVID-19, the schools would not allow pre-service teachers to participate in physically observing face-to-face settings in a classroom. Unable to participate in my field experience in the classroom furthermore, a non-traditional setting was provided. In which we had to implement the protocols from the CDC to wear masks, socially distance, and to sanitize our hands and whatever equipment we used during the field experience. We participated in a STEAMulation camp in which we designed lessons and practiced implementing them for the three different camp events."

Participants were asked, "Do you feel that your field experience would have been different if you have been in a 'traditional' school setting?"

*Participant A*

"I believe my field experience would have been a lot different because I would have been able to see a couple different science teachers lecturing a class and observed their style of teaching to help me better understand the best way to deliver information to the students. In addition, it would have helped me have a reference frame from a teacher standpoint instead of from the student view. While we did our MOCK lessons, I had trouble structuring my lesson without having the previous observation of a teacher in a classroom and being able to ask the teacher questions to help me be better prepared to teach in a classroom. It also would have allowed me to watch a few lessons being taught before teaching a lesson myself."

*Participant B*

"I feel my experience in a traditional classroom setting would be different than what I experienced during my observation hours at the Boys and Girls Clubs. During the non-traditional setting, I had to change my train of thought. Due to not being in my own classroom and having easy access to my supplies, I had to be sure I was more organized, and we made sure to take all the materials needed to the STEM camp. There was a lot of teamwork going on. I was moving materials around and making sure to set up and take down the materials depending on which classmate was doing their lesson. I had to take account of what my classmates wanted when it came to seating arrangements with the kids. I could easily access every child since the rooms were big, and there were no more than 15 children that attended the camps. I feel as if my group of classmates also agreed on the procedures. We decided to use 1,2,3, eyes on me as an attention grabber when the students started to get too loud, off task, out of hand. We also tried the method where the teacher raises their hand quietly until the students also do the same. At first, it was a little awkward to use these methods because the kids varied by age and were not familiar with us. As time went on, they worked great. The kids caught on very quickly. To check for understanding, we also used the Green, Yellow, Red card method. After the lesson, the student holds the color they see fit, green meaning they fully understand, yellow meaning they somewhat understand, and red meaning they did not understand."

*Participant C*

"I certainly think that being in a traditional school environment would have greatly benefited the way I conducted the classroom. The age difference I think was one of the greatest obstacles when teaching in this setting. Being in a regular classroom where this is not really a

> factor would result in not having to customize the lesson plan to cater to students in such drastically different writing, reading and comprehending levels. Finding the right vocabulary and enthusiasm and vocabulary to keep all students engaged, was not my forte but it was something I progress in each weekend."

*Participant D*

> "Yes, in a traditional field experience setting it would have been different because usually when in a traditional setting the pre-service teacher mostly just observes and does some required tasks with students. Also, in the traditional setting, it really depends on the mentor teacher that the pre-service teacher is observing as to how involved the pre-service teacher is allowed to be in the classroom. In addition, being in a traditional classroom setting allows the pre-service teacher the opportunities to ask the mentor teacher about the specifics on why he/she taught the way they did for the lesson being observed. Furthermore, in the traditional class setting as a pre-service teacher, I would have been able to observe the appropriate grade level versus the nontraditional setting in which we had to work with students from younger grades."

Based on comments made by some participants, they felt that not being able to observe traditional teachers conduct their own lessons prior to engaging with students, their field experience would have been different if they had. Initially, *STEAMulation Saturday Minicamps* were to be organized by grade level. Sessions were intended to be K-3, 4-6, and 7-8. Due to conflicts with scheduling transportation to local clubs, parents' work schedules, and students' sports schedules, it became necessary to allow some age/grade overlap in campers participation at each session.

Participants were asked, "As a pre-service teacher who was working with students in a non-traditional setting due to COVID-19 discuss What worked well? What was frustrating? What might you do differently next time, if you taught the lesson again?"

*Participant A*

> "Using visuals, audio, example, and manipulatives worked well in the classroom setting. Trying to explain instructions with a mask that muffled my voice and sometimes left students unsure at times. Also, trying to assist students who refused to listen and were constantly distracted or were the distraction. Using the verbal and nonverbal cues to stop disruptive behavior did not work with some of the students during the lessons and made it difficult to keep the attention of the other students. To do it differently, I would need to modify the lesson to fix the time limit and better examples to segway into the table and graph so that students can understand how to make a proper graph. Also, to limit the amount of free play with the rockets and saving it for when the students are collecting the data."

*Participant B*

> "I think the STEM camps worked well, I enjoyed how we co-taught, and everyone had a lesson or two that flowed into the next area. The only thing that was frustrating was not knowing how many kids would show up. If I were to do it all again, I would make sure I had visuals like pictures or a video so the students can learn the types of energies in more than one way. I also wanted to do more lessons. I love walking children through concepts and seeing the learning process take over."

*Participant C*

> "The students for the most part were interested in the activities and wanted to have fun. There were a few that were perhaps too young and took some time to get involved and participate. The objectives of the lesson were sometimes not met as outside distraction along with some of the toys they held took all their attention. I often had to use the Hand Up strategy to ensure that I had all of the student's attention and the lesson was able to move along.

A practice that worked well was to begin every class group with the class expectations and protocols at the beginning and not as we completed the lessons. Another good strategy is to decide on the same classroom management strategies, this would have ensured that all students had some kind of consistency in this regard. A frustrating part of the field experience was having procedure and transition from moving from one lesson to the next. This was especially true of the bouncy ball. The problem was later resolved by rearranging the lessons to minimize this and to give students small Ziploc Bags to keep the artifacts out of their hands. Finally, something that I would do differently is to have better control of the age groups of each class, this was a constant problem as I had to accommodate the lesson plan too much, making it inefficient and cumbersome."

*Participant D*

"When working with students in a nontraditional setting some things that worked well are having the students participate in hands-on activities, letting the students assist when possible, repeated review, and grouping the kids that were alike or close in age. However, there were some frustrations in the nontraditional setting such as being able to keep challenging students engaged and on-task while keeping the lesson going and keeping the balance of getting prepared for the next part of the lesson while still trying to monitor the students. Now if I was to teach my lesson again something I might do differently is to have a couple of stations set up so that during the wait time for the super bounce balls to set they can be completing an activity that pertains to the lesson that involves talking about the different types of energy, how they would look by drawing diagrams, and examples from the real world."

Participants were concerned with the overlap in ages and grade levels of the campers. Future *STEAMulating Saturday Minicamps* will adhere to age and grade level requirements to ensure that activities presented are appropriate for campers. It is worth noting that although some mini campers were considerably younger than fellow campers in their sessions, they did not exhibit any difficulty in participation in any learning activities.

Participants were asked, "What are your thoughts on conducting field observations in a COVID – 19 impacted situations? Do you feel that it has given you a realistic view of teaching learners?"

*Participant A*

"I do not believe that I received as much as I wanted to from the field observation. COVID-19 prevented me from observing a science teacher lecturing a full class and being able to see their response to distractions or students struggling to understand the material. By having nontraditional field observations, we jumped straight into teaching without more than a quick model lesson, I unfortunately struggled with this since not having any prior education courses. I feel like it may have given us a brief view into teaching but not the full realistic view of what to truly expect in the classroom teaching."

*Participant B*

"Overall, the experience was delightful. At first, I was anxious about doing the camps vs. doing classroom observations. I think it gave me the experience that most teachers have with adapting to the environment around them. I did not get the traditional type of observing. Still, I did get to experience watching how science can impact all kinds of students and how different strategies work on different children."

*Participant C*

"I think conducting field observation during COVID has given me as a pre-service teacher a view of how adaptable and open minded one must be. Although the experience I believe did not grant a completely realistic view of what teaching will be I was still able to learn many strategies and gain experience that I will use as a teacher."

*Participant D*

> "Truly I do have to say conducting the field observations in the COVID-19 impacted situation really helped me to learn how to execute a lesson and gave me a sense of how it will be when I am creating lesson plans for my own classroom and making sure that I have all the parts prepared so that I can be efficient and purposeful during my lesson. I also think it gave me the chance to grow and learn as a future teacher by giving me the opportunities to be on both sides being that of the teacher and of an observer to the other pre-service teachers. I do feel that this experience has given me a realistic view on teaching learners in general even with students that are younger than the original grade levels I would like to teach. However, I do appreciate having the younger than the original grade levels because they helped me to grow and learn about how to better differentiate my instruction and how to reach all students during a lesson even though there were some challenging students. I hope they will continue to conduct this form of nontraditional field experience along with traditional field experience because I think in combination it will benefit pre-service teachers greatly so that they can better serve their future students."

In examining participants' replies for commonalities, an important observation became apparent. Two of the participants had prior experiences working with young learners and two had not. One participant indicated that prior to enrolling in the science/mathematics instructional strategy methods course, s/he had not taken in pedagogy courses. This fact may have influenced her/his perception of the experience. Those with prior experiences working with learners in some capacity viewed the experiences more favorably. Due to the structure of the minicamps, some indicated that they did not receive a realistic view of working with learners.

**Conclusions and Implications for Practice**

Until either a cure or treatment for the COVID-19 virus is found, colleges, universities, and school districts will continue to struggle to find effective means to provide preservice teachers with effective, authentic field observation opportunities. As discussed by Cuenca (2020), many teacher education programs will continue to lean on field observation experiences to fulfill the balance of teacher preparation. The drawback is that schools are placed in positions of stopping students from visiting schools when COVID-19 infection rates in communities reach unacceptable levels. In Texas, areas with hospitalization rates above 15% for seven straight days must shut down (Texas Association of Counties, 2020). Some education preparation programs are substituting in person observation experiences with microteaching, case-based instruction, video analysis, virtual simulations, and other non-traditional methods (Holdheide 2020, Kim 2020). Some authors of this article question the effectiveness of field observation experiences that do not provide preservice teachers to interact with actual learners.

The Boys and Girls Club field observation experiences were developed by faculty to provide preservice teachers an opportunity to complete denied required field observation hours, and to obtain practical field observation and experiences by interacting with actual learners. The unique approach allowed preservice teachers to develop STEAM lessons and actually present them to learners under the supervision of the department of education faculty. These experiences were to be unique in that they were 1) in a non-traditional setting and 2) preservice teachers would be able to actually conduct lessons with learners under university faculty supervision.

Having reviewed reflections from participating preservice teachers, authors of this submission conclude that in future *STEAMulation Saturday Minicamp* administrations, certified science/mathematics faculty will conduct full initial mini camps sessions with elementary and middle school learners while preservice teachers observe from beginning to end. Preservice teachers will conduct remaining minicamp sessions. An additional requirement will be that minicamp sessions adhere to age and grade level requirements. A critical component of future sessions will require preservice teachers modeling class management with mini campers before preservice teachers are allowed to conduct activities on their own.

Authors recommend that education preparation programs combine non-traditional field experiences with traditional field experiences to help future educators become more flexible in adapting to future situations in which traditional classroom teaching becomes interrupted. We agree with Holdheide (2020) that preservice teachers should have early and continual experiences with learners, either in traditional classrooms or through non-traditional field experiences.

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