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Improving the Quality of Field Experiences: A Program Improvement Plan

Cody Geisler
Northwestern College - Orange City

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Cody Geisler

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

Abstract

For early childhood education students, field experiences are a critical component of applying content knowledge to real-world experience in the classroom. The problem is the number of field experience hours does not assure quality learning for the early childhood education student. A review of literature on the topic of quality field experiences revealed a need for scaffolded experiences, positive relationships with mentor teachers and integration of reflective practice. 13 participating mentor teachers and 14 students currently enrolled in the early childhood education program at Minnesota North College were surveyed to collect data related to scaffolded experiences, mentor teacher roles and relationships and reflective practice. The early childhood education program at Minnesota North College was evaluated using a three-point rubric for alignment with markers of quality field experiences. In response to research and data analysis, a developmental trajectory of field experiences throughout four semesters was created. Additionally, mentor teacher roles and responsibilities were clarified and organized within three distinct levels of interaction. Finally, a framework for embedding scaffolded reflective practice was developed. Implementation of scaffolded field experiences, positive mentor teacher relationships and embedded reflective practice will create a high-quality field experience component to the early childhood program.

Keywords: early childhood teacher education, field experience, mentor teacher, reflection, scaffolding experiences

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"Field experiences are at the heart of every early childhood education professional education program" (NAEYC, 2021, p. 32) and the quality of the experience is directly related to the learning outcomes for aspiring early childhood educators. In fact, "...the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) has called for a transformation of teacher education highlighting clinical experiences and partnerships as critical components." (Han et al, 2021, p.62). Research shows that the characteristics of a high-quality field experience component include "...a developmental trajectory of field-based experiences..." (Lees & Kennedy, 2017, p. 56), positive and purposeful relationships with mentor teachers (Epstein & Willhite, 2015; Lux et al, 2022; Simsar & Jones, 2021), and the implementation of reflective practice for pre-service teachers (Foong et al, 2018; Hojeij et al, 2021; Lux et al, 2022).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2021) and Minnesota's Knowledge and Competency Framework for Early Childhood Professionals (2021) have laid out very specific standards for quality of field experiences but have not "...set a minimum number of field experience hours required..." (NAEYC, 2021). The problem is, "...what occurs during the field experience is more important than the length of the experience" (Retallick & Miller, 2010, p.65). Therefore, the focus remains on the quality learning that happens within each experience, rather than the quantity of time spent in field experiences. The present field experiences required within the early childhood education program at Minnesota North College (Grand Rapids, Minnesota) are high in quantity and low in quality; therein lies the problem.

The purpose of this program improvement plan is to improve the quality of field experiences for pre-service early childhood professionals enrolled in a two-year program.

Current practices under-utilize the required field experience hours by lacking a connection between content learning in the classroom and practice in the field, untapped potential for classroom teachers to serve as mentors to pre-service teachers and the absence of reflective practice. The measurement of program quality is based on research related to scaffolding, mentor relationships and reflective practice. By improving the quality of field experiences related to these three components, the program will develop early childhood educators who "...demonstrate skills and abilities needed to work effectively in the field" (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021, p. 6) as laid out in the Minnesota's Knowledge and Competency Framework for Early Childhood Professionals.

Research on the topic of quality field experiences in early childhood teacher preparation programs was conducted using Google Scholar, the Dewitt Library at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa and online databases available through Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU). The author relied primarily upon peer reviewed research articles published within the last ten years. While initial research aimed at studies related to teacher preparation in early childhood, limited resources necessitated expansion of the research to include teacher preparation in K-12 education as well. In addition, limited availability of research within the United States required the inclusion of research from other geographic locations such as Australia, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. The scope of this research shows that pre-service educators at all grade levels and in many parts of the world have improved their knowledge and competencies though field experience. The potential benefits of quality field experiences are not limited to early childhood teacher education or only programs within the United States.

The principle finding of the literature review is that pre-service early childhood teachers increase their knowledge, competency and self-efficacy by engaging in quality field experiences. Understanding the components of a quality field experience informs program design which "...provides teacher candidates with experiential opportunities to...apply knowledge gained through classroom instruction, hone professional skills and develop dispositions that are crucial to their ability to work with young children, families and professional peers" (Linn & Jacobs, 2015, p. 274). By aligning research found throughout the literature review with Minnesota's Knowledge and Competency Framework for Early Childhood Professionals (2021) and current course outlines, our program will improve the quality of field experiences for early childhood students.

Review of the Literature

The literature review begins by providing a foundational rationale for field experience as a means of learning by connecting knowledge to practice. Next, the author explores the components of a quality field experience program for pre-service early childhood educators. The first component includes a developmental model, or scaffolding, of field experiences and various models for scaffolded field experiences are discussed. Second, the literature specifies the importance of the role of the mentor teacher as a powerful tool for enriching the field experience. Finally, reflective practice as a third and critical component of quality field experiences is explained.

Rationale for Field Experience

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), field experiences in the early childhood setting "...include informal and formal opportunities …to observe and practice…through observations, practice student teaching…and other clinical

practice experiences such as home visiting" (Lux et al, p.19). To meet the demands of present-day early childhood education, teachers need a solid foundation in content knowledge and understanding. Chang, Early & Winton state, "...coursework is essential in providing the knowledge base needed" (2005, p. 112). However, "It is not enough for teacher candidates to have knowledge…they must have opportunities to practice their skills and apply their knowledge in structured and safe situations to develop these skills" (Hooks et al., 2019, p.70). Field experiences are an opportunity for the early childhood education student to make connections between what is being learned in class and apply that content knowledge in real-world, real-classroom settings (Fukkink et al., 2019; Hooks et al., 2019; Linn & Jacobs, 2015; Visser-Jones & Liu, 2022).

Developmentally appropriate practice is an example of a concept that is both knowledge and practice. Research shows that the best time to positively impact a new teacher's beliefs related to developmentally appropriate practice are in the pre-service years (Chang et al., 2005; Hooks et al., 2019; Kim, 2010; Linn & Jacobs, 2015). According to Kim (2010), "The preservice educational stage…is a critical period in which new teachers begin to develop and elaborate upon their own beliefs. Once beliefs are developed, it is difficult to change them" (p. 12). In addition, "...teacher candidates are more likely to adopt principles of highly effective teaching if they have experiences that allow them to observe and positively experience effective classroom interactions with children" (Linn & Jacobs, 2015, p. 286). Because practice is required in order to adopt the necessary skills, "...field experiences are crucial to teachers' ability to facilitate developmentally appropriate learning and achieve desired outcomes for all children" (p. 273-274).

Additionally, pre-service teachers who have participated in quality field experiences tend to have greater self-efficacy, less "practice shock", and higher rates of retention in the first year of teaching (Linn & Jacobs, 2015; Mischo, 2015; Simsar & Jones, 2021; Van Schagen et al., 2016). Indeed, "...self-efficacy beliefs are considered most malleable during initial teacher education and specifically, during practicum experiences" (Simsar & Jones, 2021, p. 520). A longitudinal study of 348 German early childhood teachers measured their self-efficacy 1 year before graduation, upon graduation and 4 months following graduation (presumably, shortly after entering the workforce). The study found that students who had a positive field experience, referred to in the study as *practice orientation*, also had higher levels of child- and environment-related competencies after graduation and at the beginning of their careers. That is, they felt more competent than their peers who had less or less positive field experiences (Mischo, 2015).

Another longitudinal study measured the perceived preparation of Dutch pre-service teachers based on whether they participated in clinically oriented or traditional teaching programs. The teacher candidates who were working and learning within the clinical program initially reported feeling *less prepared* to meet teaching standards, but over time and with additional experiences, the same teachers felt *more prepared* than their non-clinical counterparts (Fukkink et al., 2019). This finding demonstrates that high quality field experiences provide participants with an authentic, contextual understanding of the career requirements while simultaneously providing an opportunity to develop skills over time.

Both Bardach et al. (2022) and Linn & Jacobs (2015) support the idea that increased levels of teacher self-efficacy increase likelihood of teachers continuing in the profession. Bardach and colleagues found that "...both syntheses clearly reveal positive relations between self-efficacy and [teacher] commitment" (2022, p. 235). Linn & Jacobs, quoting

research from the National Council for the Accreditation of Teachers agree by stating, “Prior research points to higher retention rates and greater teacher efficacy among new teachers prepared in intensive clinically based programs” (Linn & Jacobs, 2015, p. 273). Therefore, it is plausible to conclude that quality field experience during the pre-service years may very well lead to higher teacher self-efficacy, resulting in greater long-term commitment for teachers, including those in the early childhood settings.

Scaffolding Field Experiences for Development

In education, scaffolding refers to a system of supports designed to gradually increase a student’s independent use of newly acquired knowledge (Sabbott, 2015). In the same way that learning is scaffolded and builds upon itself in the K-12 setting, so too in higher education. This is seen in programs of study that require a student to pass one course before enrolling in the next. As early childhood education students acquire new content knowledge within courses, it stands to reason that their field experiences might also be of greater value when they follow a developmental trajectory (Han et al., 2021; Hojeij et al., 2021; Jenset et al., 2018; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Kennedy & Lees 2017; Lutton, 2019).

Research on the systems of support in teacher preparation field experiences revealed several different models. Han, Damjanovich and Ward describe the program they designed at the University of South Florida: “In order to support [pre-service teacher’s] development of teacher identity and appropriate initiative taking, we designed the clinical experiences to incorporate co-teaching as well as a gradual release of independence…Two PSTs are assigned to the same classroom on the same day during Level 1 clinical experience; two PSTs are assigned to the same classroom but each report on separate days during Level 2 clinical experience; and then finally one PST is assigned to a classroom during Level 3 clinical experience. In this way,

we were able to embed various co-teaching approaches as a transitional phase for PSTs to learn how to teach" (2021, p.66). In addition, the number of field experience hours required and the level of educational setting increased each semester.

Kennedy & Lees have developed a community-based teacher preparation program at Loyola University in Chicago and have written extensively on their findings (2015, 2017). "For early childhood teacher candidates, the…program involves learning increasingly sophisticated teaching practices in authentic contexts…This learning takes place during eight semesters of field-based preparation (referred to as sequences and consisting of shorter modules of 3 to 12 weeks in length)" (2017, p. 56). Students enter the *exploration* phase their freshman year, with a cohort of 5-9 students as they experience a variety of classroom settings. Next, students move to the *concentration* phase alongside 6-12 other students and increased independence. Finally, students complete the *specialization* phase with a one-year independent internship. One noteworthy factor of the Loyola programs is that faculty are present on site during all field experiences to teach, facilitate group reflection, and assist students and mentor teachers individually as they problem-solve. Faculty gradually release their involvement as students move through the sequences. (Kennedy & Lees, 2015).

In another related program of study specific to the development of adult-child interactions in the infant and toddler setting, Kennedy & Lees applied MTSS (multi-tiered systems of support) and RTI (response to intervention) structures to the field experiences of their teacher candidates. Students were heavily supported by both faculty and their mentor teachers as they began to work with infants and toddlers and their families while developing their language and interaction skills. These skills were measured using CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) and the supports decreased in intensity as the student developed. The results

suggest that "...undergraduate early childhood teacher candidates in a field-based teacher education program can attain moderate-to-high levels of positive, developmentally appropriate interaction with infants and toddlers when provided daily on-site mentorship, direct supervision from classroom teachers, and a tiered system including a variety of faculty supports and approaches to supervision" (2015, p.779). In addition, the researchers believe that, through first-hand experience of MTSS and RTI as college students, teachers will have established a foundation for "...more direct examination of their understanding and applications of tiered supports [MTSS & RTI] to infants and toddlers…that also holds potential for expanding the range of supports and services available to families served" (p.779). This approach is unique in that it is highly individualized, which is well-suited to the infant-toddler setting.

A study conducted in the United Arab Emirates revealed a program that provides scaffolding within field experiences as they relate to a sequence of learning content. For example, level one focuses on observation and reflection. Level two is focused on practice related to instructional strategies, mini-teaching and reflection and level three's focus is on lesson planning, whole-class teaching and reflection (Hojeij, et al., 2021). One key factor of the program at Zayed University is the use of scaffolded *reflection* within each level of field experience. The findings from this study concur with Lutton's perspective explaining what makes a high-quality field experience program: "We know that professional development is most effective when it incorporates active learning embedded in practice; creates time and space for teachers to collaborate with peers; offers clear vision of and models high-quality teaching practice; and provides coaching and expert support tailored to individual needs. Effective professional development also encourages reflection, feedback, and change in teaching practice

and is sustained for long enough that teachers have time to learn, explore, implement and change practices" (2019, p. 47).

Research demonstrates that a variety of scaffolded approaches to field experiences exist. Some are highly focused on university teaching and learning occurring on-site, as in the case of the Loyola University program (Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Kennedy & Lees, 2017). Others simply build progressively on applying learned concepts (Hojeij, 2021). Still others focus on group experiences and gradually move to greater independence in the field (Han et al., 2021). Indeed, the specific attributes of each teacher preparation program may be as unique as the program itself and responsive to the needs of the student population, the goals of the program and the community in which the program is situated. The bottom line is that a system of supports designed to gradually increase a student's independent use of newly acquired knowledge is foundational to a high-quality plan for field experiences.

The Role of the Mentor Teacher

A high-quality field experience for early childhood education students relies on the participation of the mentor teacher. In fact, the important role of the mentor teacher in the learning experience cannot be understated. Simsar and Jones explain, "[The] mentor is an experienced teacher who is skilled in understanding standards, is able to transmit effective teaching strategies, and can engage in open communication with beginning and/or preservice teachers. Thus, the role of a mentor is to be an encourager, role model, feedback-giver, observer, and supporter" (2021, p.520). As such, the mentor teacher is in a key position to help the student make connections between knowledge and practice, which is the primary goal of field experience (Ben-Harush & Orland-Barak, 2019; Jenset et al., 2018; Linn & Jacobs, 2015; Von Schagen et al., 2016).

The early childhood education student stands to benefit in a myriad of ways from a mentor teacher who is amendable, experienced and committed to the role. According to Simsar & Jones, "...the mentor teachers provide opportunities for their preservice teachers to improve their teaching skills, and in turn, their self-efficacy beliefs" (2021, p. 527). In addition, when the early childhood education student experiences a positive relationship with the mentor teacher, their perceived efficacy may increase as well (Von Schagen et al., 2016). Linn & Jacobs agree, stating that mentor teachers, "...support novice…teacher's ability to apply content knowledge and theories of developmentally appropriate practice in their work with young children and families" (2018, p. 274). The mentor teacher may also "...share additional or alternative strategies to consider, and [give] the candidate…an opportunity to ask questions to gain additional understandings" (Lux et al., 2022, p.22). This research demonstrates that a positive relationship with an invested mentor teacher reaps numerous benefits for the early childhood education student.

However, students are not the only ones to benefit from such a relationship. There are positive outcomes for mentor teachers as well. Mentor teachers often appreciate the extra assistance an engaged early childhood education student can provide (Han et al., 2021). According to research from the University of Wisconsin Lacrosse, "In a study addressing pre-service teacher preparation, in-service teachers' professionalism, and children's achievement, 85% of mentor teachers reported learning innovative teaching strategies. Mentors also report a stronger understanding of culturally responsive teaching as well as enhanced communication and collaboration skills" (Epstein & Wilhite, 2015, p.190). Mentor teachers also report valuing the opportunity to share their experiences and expertise by modeling and answering questions (Epstein & Wilhite, 2015; Kennedy & Lees, 2017).

On the other hand, there are challenges that must be considered. First, the mentor teacher must exercise autonomy in the choice of whether or not to invest in the early childhood education student. Han (2021) and Kennedy & Lees (2015) agree that positive outcomes for the student and the teacher are more likely when the decision has been made by the mentor teacher rather than administration or college faculty. Another challenge is the time needed to invest in the early childhood education student, especially if it detracts from the time already required to invest in the classroom students. Kennedy and Lees explain that the added responsibilities of the mentoring role "...require[d] increased time…on the part of practitioners without additional compensation; in the end, however, this investment paid off" (2014, p. 72). Additional training may also be needed in order for mentor teachers to feel successful in their contributions (Visser-Jones & Liu, 2022). Finally, whereas a positive relationship with the early childhood education student may result in positive outcomes, the opposite may be true as well in that both student and mentor teacher experience feelings of frustration (VonSchagen et al., 2016).

It has been established through research that "observing classroom teaching is not enough…There was a correlation between modeling by the mentor and preservice teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, whereas there was no relationship between this construct and the amount of time spent simply observing." (Simsar & Jones, 2021, p. 526, 528). Ben-Harush & Orland-Barak expound, "...consideration should be taken regarding the proper way to design learning environments and position field mentors…within them so that the environment itself is knowledge-rich, presenting demands that propel the learning of beginning teachers" (2019, p.193). As it relates to the role of the mentor teacher in field experiences for early childhood education students, quality is vital.

Reflective Practice

To reflect is to "consider, ponder, meditate, ruminate, hypothesize, theorize, or think over" (Lux et al., 2022, p. 20). In relation to its role in effective teaching, "...reflection is a recursive and never-ending cycle of teaching and learning that is carried out in a pedagogical and professional context in such a way that teachers can establish and clarify cognitive connections between teaching and possible teaching and learning outcomes using knowledge, personal experience, and active experimentation instead of solving the situation in isolation" (Hojeij et al., 2021, p. 130). In practice, the art of reflection takes on a wide variety of formats based on the specific problem, the time frame, the available tools or the teacher himself or herself. However, whether personal reflection for the teacher is informal or formal, verbal or written, data-based or narrative, the benefits for both student and teacher are uncontested among the literature in this review (Foong et al., 2018; Hojeij et al., 2021; Jenset et al., 2018; Lux et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). "Teachers' regular reflective practice during and after teaching endows them with uniquely relevant insights that can help them improve their teaching methods and techniques" (Hojeij et al., 2021, p. 144).

The primary aim of field experiences for the early childhood education student is to link content knowledge with practice in the classroom. In kind, to glean the most new understanding from each field experience, reflection must be a cornerstone of the field experience itself. Linn & Jacobs explain, "As teacher candidates are exposed to theories, core knowledge, and field experiences, they are confronted by an ongoing interplay between their own salient beliefs, experiences, and views of themselves as future teachers." (2015, p. 274-275). As pre-service teachers work through the dissonance of their own beliefs and gradually align their experiences with developing understanding, students need a framework in which to do the work.

In their research, Hojeij, Meda & Kaviani conclude, "...if pre-service teachers are effectively trained in [reflection], they will develop a good knowledge of themselves as educators, of their students, of the learning objectives they have for their students, and of the relevant tasks they design to achieve those goals....reflective practice as such helps pre-service teachers to engage in a meaningful dialogue with themselves about what they actually do in the classroom and evaluate the effectiveness of their own teaching" (2021, p.144). Reflective practice in tandem with field experiences produces increased learning for the early childhood education student and, by extension, their future students as well (Hojeij, et al., 2021; Lux et al., 2022).

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the ability to reflect on experiences and apply newly acquired knowledge to future experiences is not innate. It is a skill that must be taught and an art that must be practiced (Fukkink et al., 2019; Hojeij et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Foong, Binti & Nolan explain, "Pre-service teachers who are novices with limited teaching and childcare experience may not be capable of critical or deep reflection without adequate support" (2018, p. 43). One tool for supporting a developing skill such as reflective practice is the "I do, we do, you do" model (Killian, 2023). Following this pattern, faculty and mentor teachers model reflective practice, the group practices collective reflection and finally, the student reflects independently.

A study among four universities in the US found evidence that teacher candidates benefitted from faculty and mentor teachers modeling reflective practice. "...Interview data suggest[s] that candidates received additional benefits from mentors' continuous modeling of reflective practice and that reflection was vital to their adaptability and success in the CEPT clinical model" (Zhang et al., 2021, p.8). Excerpts from candidate's journals "...provided in-

depth references to the critical role of reflection [and] iterated the importance of reflective practice among faculty members…" (p.8). It stands to reason that when faculty and mentor teachers are engaged in the field experiences, including but not limited to the cornerstone of reflective practice, they are able to demonstrate the metacognitive aspects of true and practice-changing reflection.

One team of researchers from the University of Malaya, Malaysia and Deakin University in Australia developed a model they termed *group dialogic reflection*. The researchers describe reflective dialogue as "...strategies that facilitate reflection and action, enabling group participants to think more critically, uncover taken-for-granted assumptions, and consider multiple perspectives and strategies…College supervisors and placement mentors, who act as facilitators, encourage pre-service teachers to think more broadly and deeply about the experience, and intentionally encourage them to link theory to practice" (Foong et al., 2018, p.44). Their findings suggest that "...collective reflection provides more opportunities for higher levels of reflective thinking than individual reflection for pre-service early childhood teachers" (p.48). By engaging in collective reflection, not only will early childhood education students exercise their newly acquired understanding of reflection itself, but they will gain multiple perspectives on the same experience which is likely to result in greater learning for the individual (Foong et al., 2018; Lux et al., 2022).

After observing faculty and mentor teachers as they demonstrate reflective practice and participating in collective reflection as a group, the early childhood education student has developed a foundation for individual reflection. As programs prepare their students to transition to the role of teacher, it is expected that they will have acquired the skills needed to embed personal reflection into their own classrooms. It stands to reason, then, that they have ample

opportunities to practice individual reflection (Foong et al., 2018; Hojeij et al., 2021; Lux et al., 2022). The most common application of individual reflection in the college setting is the reflective journal, though there may be other means of recording personal thoughts and ideas such as video or audio. No matter the medium, "Teachers' regular reflective practice during and after teaching endows them with uniquely relevant insights that can help them improve their teaching methods and techniques" (Hojeij et al., 2021, p. 144).

In summary, the research suggests that high quality field experiences must include a developmental trajectory or scaffolding, an invested and experienced mentor teacher and reflective practice. Each of these components lend themselves to the development of the early childhood education student and are very much in line with the work of Lev Vygotsky and the idea of the zone of proximal development (Barohny, 2019 & Berk, 2018). With the research at hand and the goal of growing students who are both knowledgeable and practiced, there is room for improvement to the field experience component of the current program at Minnesota North College.

School Profile

Community Demographics

The Minnesota North College Itasca campus is located on more than 200 acres of forested land in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. Grand Rapids is a rural community with a population of roughly 11,000 people and Itasca has been a part of the community since 1922. As a two-year community and technical college, it has sought to "provide academic programming and skills training to prepare students for jobs or to transfer to four-year colleges and universities" (Role of Community College, 2023) for the past 100 years as Itasca Community College. Primary

program offerings include associate of arts, engineering, education, nursing and natural resources.

Grand Rapids is just one community that is served by Itasca. In fact, the name of the college campus is the same as the county whose residents it serves. Just over 45,000 people live and work in Itasca county, primarily in the logging, paper and mining industries. Itasca county is 92% White and 3.8% Native American. 94% of the population has graduated high school and 25% possess a bachelor's degree or higher. The median annual income is $58,393 and approximately 10% of the population is living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Itasca County, Minnesota, n.d.).

Campus Demographics

In May of 2022, Itasca Community College merged with five other community college campuses in the arrowhead region of northern Minnesota to form Minnesota North College. The mission of Minnesota North College is to "prepare lifelong learners and engaged citizens through inclusive, transformative experiences reflecting the character and natural environment of the region." Its vision is to "be the premier provider of life-changing education and the catalyst for regional prosperity" (Mission and Vision – Minnesota North College, 2023). Each campus has a unique role in its community, as well as a unique set of course and program offerings.

Currently, 601 students are enrolled part-time or full-time at the Itasca campus. 78% are White and 22% are people of color. 50% receive state or federal financial aid. 19% live on campus and the rest live in the area and commute to campus or access courses remotely (Minnesota North College Factbook, 2022). 14 students are currently enrolled in the early childhood program. 10 are freshmen and 4 are sophomores. 100% of current students are female and are between 16 and 30 years of age. 12 students are White, 1 is Biracial and 1 is

Latina. The participants have a variety of experience in the field of early childhood. 5 have had no prior experience working in the field, 2 have prior experience but are not currently working in the field, 5 are working part-time in the early childhood setting and 2 are working full-time in early childhood classrooms (Early Childhood Student Demographics, 2023).

Program Overview

Itasca's early childhood field experiences are conducted in a variety of settings in the area. The primary partners for early childhood education students are Invest Early and Kootasca Head Start. Invest Early was established in 2005 as a collaborative between area school districts, county agencies, Head Start and the Blandin Foundation to "partner with families and early childhood programs to provide the best possible start for all children" (Invest Early, n.d.). Between Invest Early and Head Start, the programs administrate 33 classrooms throughout the county and serve over 300 children from birth-5 years of age. In addition to serving children, including those at risk, Invest Early also seeks to serve their families. The program offers a menu of services to families as well, including adult basic education, transportation, extended childcare, family development and mental health support.

The early childhood program at Minnesota North College, Itasca, has two career options. Students may enroll in the 1-year Child Development Certificate program or the 2-year Associate of Science in Early Childhood program. Upon completion of the 1-year certificate, a student may choose to continue into the 2-year AS program. The 2-year Associate of Science degree can be a terminal degree and students may choose to enter the workforce at that point. Alternatively, they may choose to continue their education and transfer to a 4-year institution to complete a Bachelor's degree. 100% of current early childhood education students are enrolled in the 2-year Associate of Science degree program.

With a 1-year Child Development Certificate, a student is qualified to work as an assistant in a Head Start classroom or in Invest Early. Though the certificate is not required to be hired as an assistant, individuals will receive a higher wage than those who have not earned one. In addition, the 1-year certificate meets the coursework requirements for obtaining the National Child Development Associate (CDA) certification. Federal Head Start programs require a minimum of the National CDA in order to be hired as a classroom teacher. Students who possess a 2-year AS degree in early childhood will also be provided higher wages in the workforce and increased opportunities for classroom leadership. Currently, 100% of Invest Early's classroom lead teachers possess a 4-year degree and approximately 50% of Head Start lead teachers have earned the same.

Program learning goals have recently been established. They include 1) describe how children develop within each of four primary domains from birth to 8 years of age, 2) evaluate the essential needs of children as they relate to health, safety and nutrition, 3) create developmentally-appropriate learning experiences that meet the needs of the whole child, 4) apply a variety of observation and assessment methods through case studies and hands-on observations, 5) identify and apply strategies to establish a learning environment and collaborative relationships with families that take into account the diverse backgrounds and experiences of the child and family, 6) explain how to support and meet the needs of children with special needs in the early childhood setting, and 7) demonstrate professionalism as it applies to the early childhood setting. Currently, there are no specified learning goals explicitly related to field experiences. Rather, field experiences service as one setting in which program learning goals are met.

Field Experience Component

The 2-year early childhood program at Itasca currently requires students to complete a total of 246 hours of field experience. Seven courses have reduced seat time to accommodate 16 hours of field experience per course and one course requires ten hours. During the final semester of the program, students also complete a 134-hour internship. Students are assigned to classrooms by college faculty and administrators from Invest Early and Head Start. The faculty makes an effort to ensure that throughout the two years, students are able to experience a variety of ages and classrooms. Administrators assign MNC students to classrooms with experienced teachers. The classroom teachers may or may not have volunteered for the role. In general, classroom teachers are amenable to hosting college students, but a few have been apathetic or resistant.

From their first field experience placement, students are assigned to classrooms individually. They are provided with the name and contact information for the classroom teacher and are expected to schedule their hours and complete them independently. The only preparation for their first experience is a class lecture and discussion on professionalism in the field. Their contact information is also shared with the classroom teacher and classroom teachers are encouraged to contact their administrator if any needs or concerns should arise. Moreover, if a student is employed full time in the early childhood setting, the student may complete all field experience hours within their own classroom.

Course requirements as they relate to field experiences are dependent on the instructor. Historically, the only requirement has been to submit a completed and signed timesheet as evidence of hours completed; one per course. The 134-hour internship course includes assignments - primarily personal reflection papers - and the student is observed twice. If

students have questions or concerns about their field experiences, these are typically addressed in private conferences. Group reflection has not been a common occurrence.

Summary

Overall, the early childhood program at Minnesota North College's Itasca campus has many positive qualities. Program coursework is accredited by the state and provides a solid foundation of content knowledge. It is deeply rooted in the community and students are provided ample opportunities to engage in area early childhood classrooms. It is also accommodating for students who are already employed in the field. Development of the field experience component to maximize its potential for learning will increase the quality of the program overall.

Needs Assessment

The field experiences for students at Minnesota North's Itasca campus are high in quantity and low in quality. Quality, in this case, is defined as the amount of learning gleaned by the early childhood education student and not the quality of the field experience classrooms themselves. Throughout the two-year program, students experience more than 250 hours in the field. Currently, the expectations for these experiences are simple: the student arrives at the assigned early childhood classroom and stays for the duration of the time requirement. Based on Minnesota's Knowledge and Competency Framework for Early Childhood Professionals (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021), the components of high-quality field experiences from NAEYC's Higher Education Accreditation Standards (2021), and current research on the subject, the early childhood program at Itasca needs to be improved to include scaffolding, a cooperative relationship with mentor teachers and purposeful reflection.

At present, the first-year early childhood student is enrolled in EDUC1300 Foundations of Early Childhood Education and ECED1207 Children's Health, Safety & Nutrition during the first semester. The courses require 16 hours each of field experience for a total of 32 hours. The student participates in a lecture about professionalism in the field and what to expect in the classroom. He or she is provided with the name, contact number and location of the site that has been assigned. The student is then expected to make contact, schedule their hours and complete them by the end of the semester. Field experience assignments follow the same format for all consecutive courses throughout the two years.

A sequenced and scaffolded structure needs to be established in order to increase the quality of learning gained by field experiences for early childhood students. In the same way that content knowledge builds on itself throughout the four semesters of coursework, field experiences should also build upon one another (Han et al., 2021; Hojeij et al., 2021; Jenset et al., 2018; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Kennedy & Lees 2017; Lutton, 2019). In addition to providing experiences in diverse settings, students stand to gain from learning cooperatively as a group, in pairs and finally as individuals in the field. In doing so, the students are given instruction, modeling, and the chance to ask questions before being expected to do so independently.

At this time, mentor teachers are selected by their administrators based on their quality, experience and the make-up of their classrooms. Prior to the semester, Minnesota North faculty meets with early childhood program administrators to assign students to classrooms. The students are provided the mentor teacher's contact information and the mentor teacher is notified that a student will be reaching out to schedule the required amount of time in their classroom. All contact with mentor teachers is done by their administrator and concerns that arise from

mentor teachers are addressed by the same administrator. Likewise, any concerns on the part of the early childhood student are addressed to faculty. Faculty and program administrators are in contact to resolve any issues. Logistically, this is somewhat cumbersome because, if a student has not contacted a site or a mentor teacher neglects to return the student's phone call or email, both faculty and administration need to be involved in making the contact. An improvement would be to assign the coordination contact to MNC faculty.

Another area for improvement is allowing mentor teachers to choose whether or not to host a Minnesota North early childhood student. In doing so, mentor teachers would increase their ownership of the experience and potentially be more willing to engage in sharing their acquired knowledge, expertise and skill with the MNC student. When a mentor teacher views their role as impactful, the quality of learning from the experience for the early childhood education student increases (Ben-Harush & Orland-Barak, 2019; Jenset et al., 2018; Linn & Jacobs, 2015; Von Schagen et al., 2016).

As it stands, mentor teachers are given little to no training related to their role in hosting an early childhood education student. Likewise, they are left to their own ideas about the role of the student in their classrooms. The only piece of information mentor teachers are provided is a list of things the Minnesota North College student is expected *to do* such as maintain professionalism and confidentiality and *not do* such as be alone with, discipline or diaper a child (see Appendix A). Improvement to this component would include a brief training for mentor teachers during fall staff training days or another convenient time prior to hosting an MNC student.

Research shows that reflection is a powerful tool for gleaning additional understanding from field experiences (Hojeij et al, 2021). Students are occasionally assigned a written personal

reflection that relates to their experiences in the field. The instructor also invites questions or concerns to be answered or addressed in class. Reflection is rarely facilitated in a group, due in part to the fact that there are no group experiences and that, within the timeframe of the course, individuals are at a variety of points in their field placements. Improvement in this area involves a developmental trajectory of reflection, beginning with modeling, then group dialogic reflection and finally independent reflection (Fukkink et al., 2019; Hojeij et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

Field experiences are a cornerstone of learning for early childhood education students. The fact that they are embedded in the majority of courses within the program is a strength that cannot be understated. Cooperative relationships with early childhood programs in the community are vital to the learning experience of Minnesota North students and should not be taken for granted. With small but significant changes made to the program related to scaffolded experiences, relationships with mentor teachers and purposeful reflection, the program itself contains the potential to become truly exceptional.

Data Analysis

Data Collection

Data was collected from first- and second-year early childhood education students at Minnesota North's Itasca campus during spring semester 2023. Twelve students responded to the survey, representing 86% of the total students who have participated in field experiences during the 2022-2023 academic year. The survey questions focused on the quality of learning related to field experiences in the program. Thirteen mentor teachers submitted responses to a survey regarding the mentor teacher experience, representing 84% of those who hosted a college student in their classrooms this year. A third data source was a rubric used to evaluate program alignment with best practice in quality field experience as determined by research on the topic

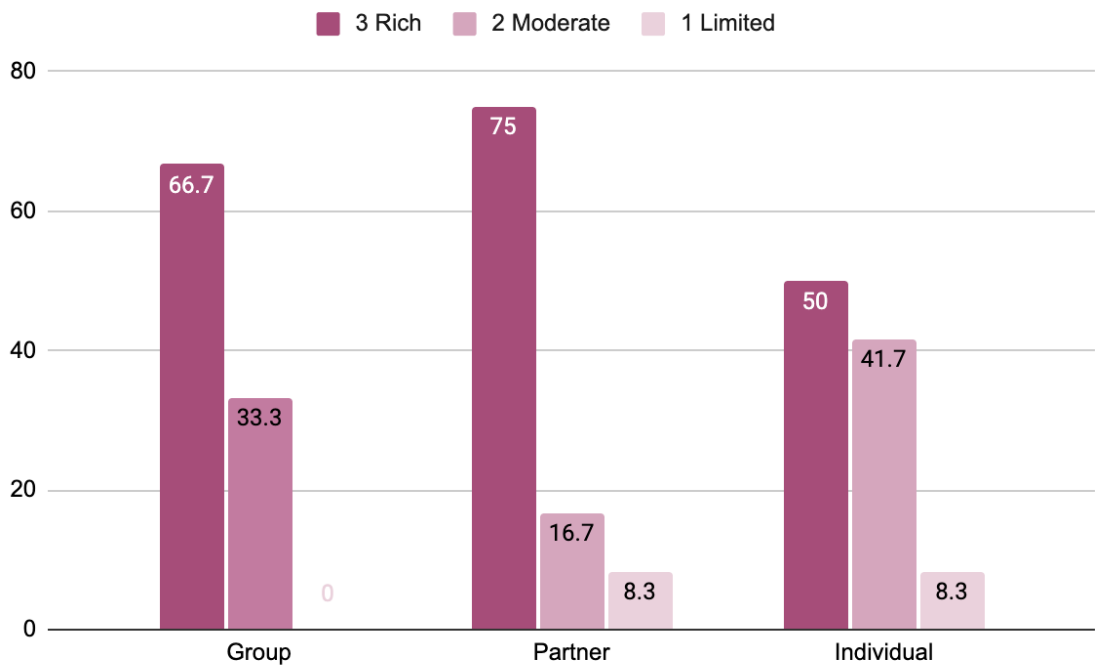
(see Appendix B). Alignment was evaluated in the areas of scaffolded experiences, mentor teacher relationships and reflection.

Student Perceptions

Current early childhood education students perceive group or partner field experiences as higher quality than individual experiences overall, with 66.7% describing group field experiences as "rich" and 33.3% describing them as "moderate" (see Figure 1). In addition, 75% perceived partner experiences as "rich" in learning and 16.7% felt that they were "moderate". One individual perceived both partner and individual field experiences as "limited" in learning. On average, 21% of students perceive group or partner field experiences as higher quality learning experiences than individual field experiences.

Figure 1

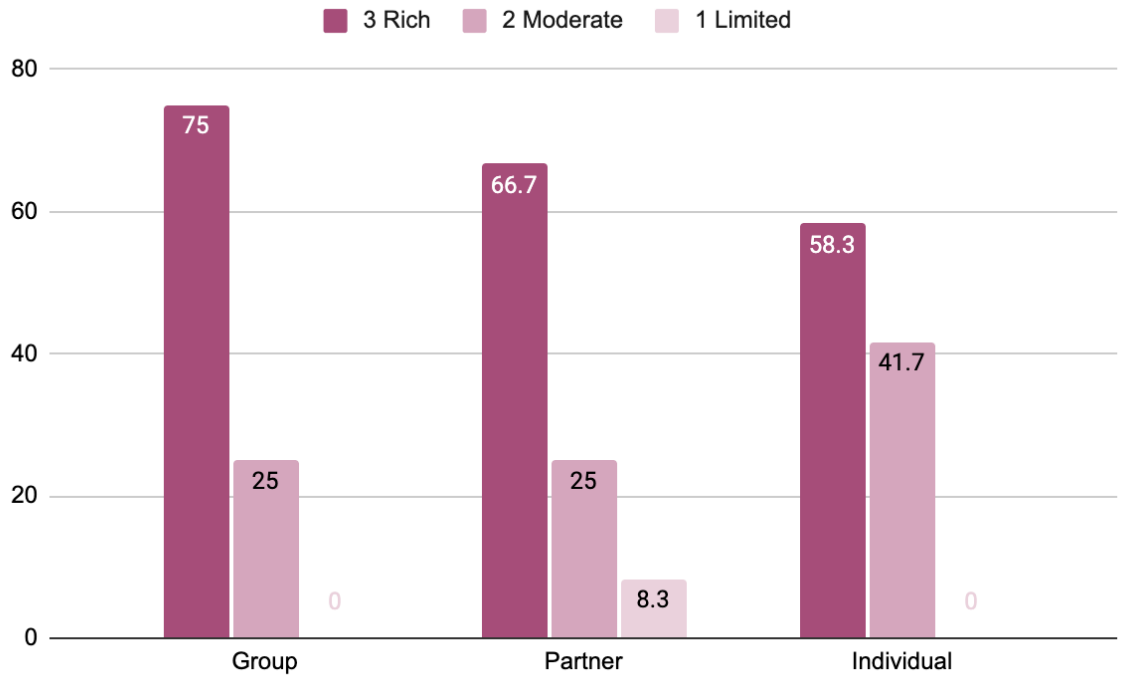
Student's Perceived Quality of Field Experiences by Type



Reflection as a group ranked highest regarding the quality of learning outcomes for students, with 75% describing it as "rich." Slightly fewer students (66.7%) believe reflection with a partner who experienced the same early childhood setting would create "rich" learning and fewer still (58.3%) believe that individual reflection provides "rich" learning (see Figure 2). Reflection in general is perceived as a high-quality learning experience, with "rich" or "moderate" learning perceived in each type.

Figure 2

Student's Perceived Quality of Reflection by Type

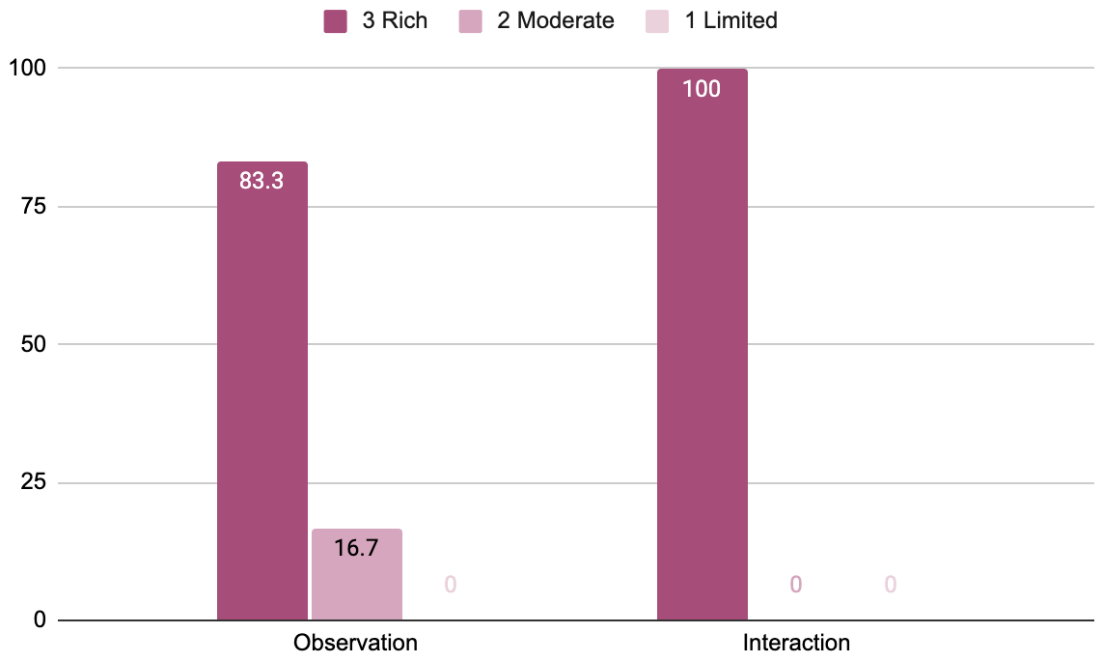


All students (100%) believe that when the classroom teacher explains things to them and they can discuss them or ask questions, their learning experience is "rich." By comparison, 83.3% of students perceive that simply observing a mentor teacher provides a "rich" learning experience (see Figure 3). This demonstrates a positive correlation between the amount of

purposeful mentor interaction and the amount of learning for the early childhood education student.

Figure 3

Student's Perceived Quality of Interactions with Mentor Teachers by Type

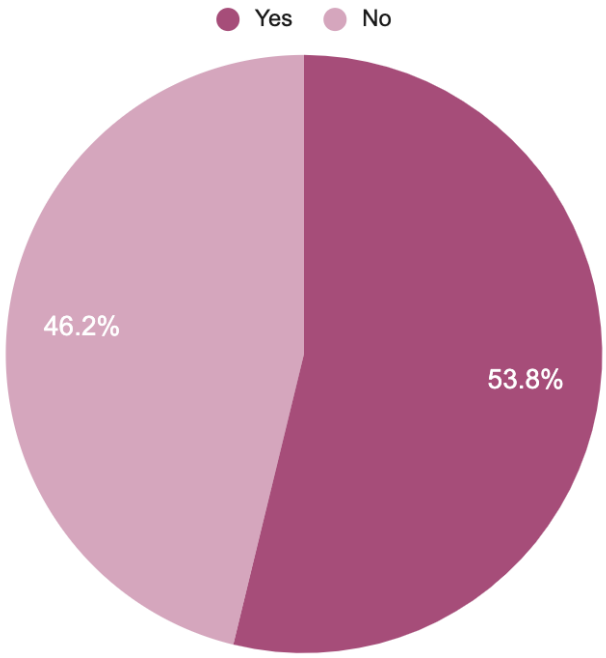


Mentor Teacher Perceptions

The data reveals that mentor teachers take greater ownership over their roles in field experiences when provided a choice (Han et al., 2021 and Kennedy & Lees, 2015). When asked whether they were given such a choice, just over half (53.8%) of mentor teachers reported that yes, they were asked whether they would host an early childhood student from Minnesota North College. This left 46.2% of mentor teachers who did not choose whether or not to serve as a mentor teacher (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

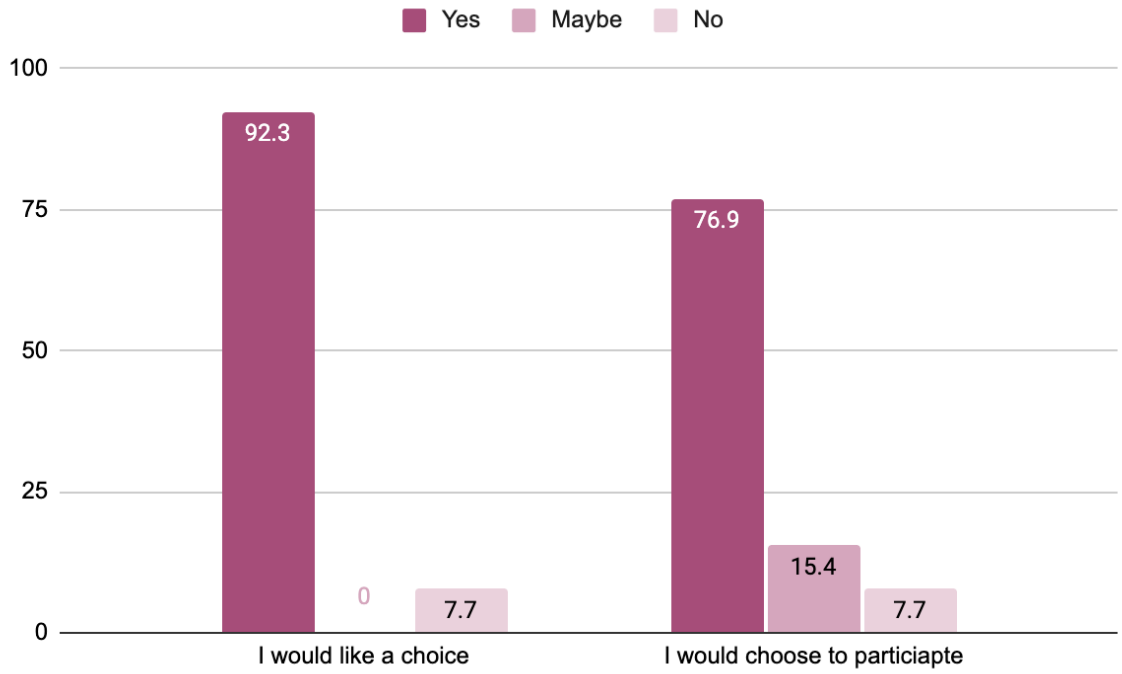
Mentor Teacher Choice: Were you asked whether you would like to participate?



Tracking with research on the subject (Han et al., 2021 and Kennedy & Lees, 2015) 92.3% of teachers who served as mentors this year would like a choice in the future. Interestingly, given such a choice, 76.9% reported that they would participate. An additional 15.4% would consider hosting a college student in their classrooms and one respondent would decline to host a college student. Those who would definitely or possibly consider the role in the future represent 92.3%; the same percentage of respondents who would appreciate a choice in the role. Only one respondent would not choose to participate in the future (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

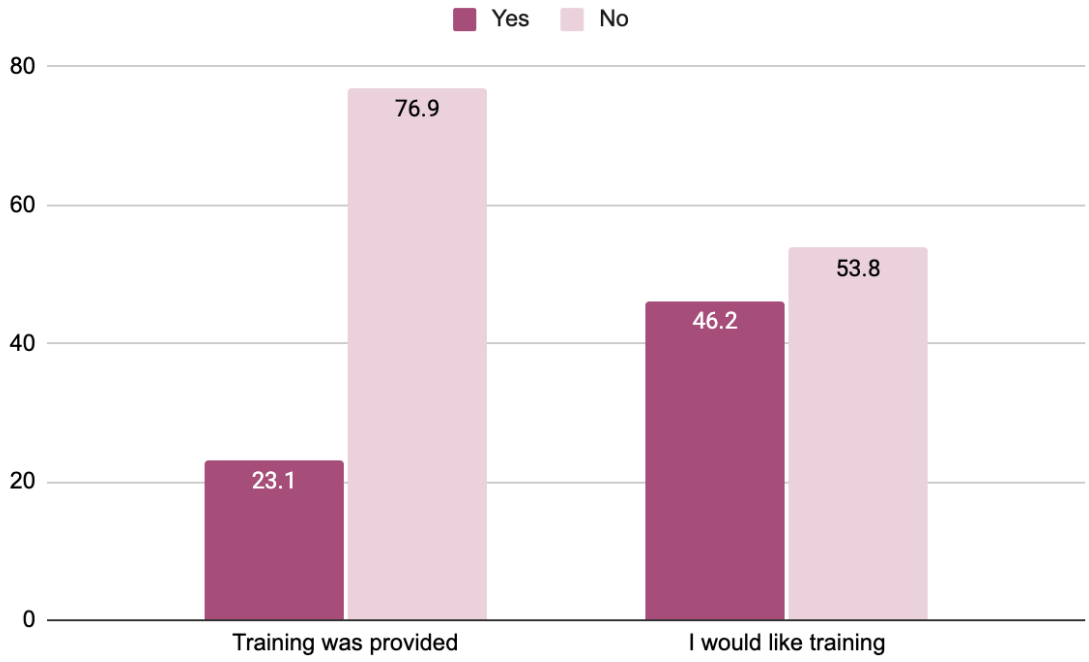
Mentor Teacher Choice: Given a choice, would you choose to participate as a mentor teacher?



When asked whether they were provided training prior to hosting a Minnesota North early childhood student, 23.1% of teachers answered that they were. The majority, 76.9%, were not provided with training. It is unknown what type of training was provided to those who received it. When asked whether they would appreciate training related to their mentor role, 46.2% agreed that they would while 53.8% would decline (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

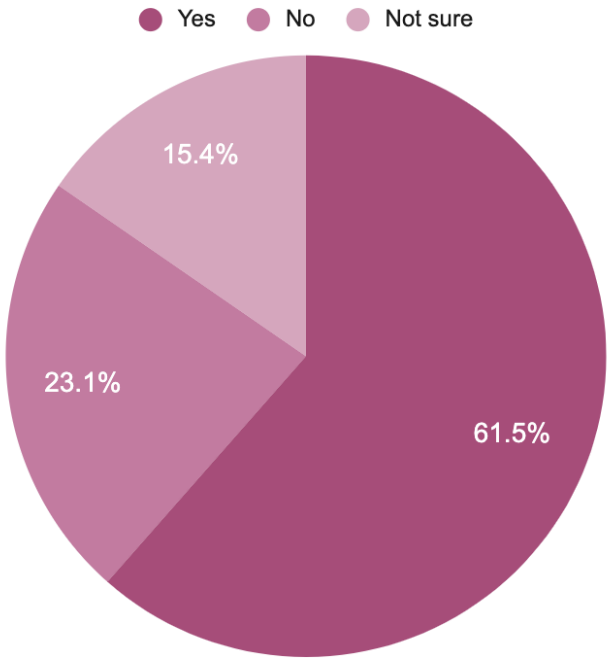
Mentor Teacher Training



The majority of mentor teachers believed that they were, in some way, able to share their knowledge, expertise and experience with the early childhood education student in their classroom, with 61.5% of teachers responding “yes.” A small percentage (15.4%) were unsure and 23.1% reported that they were not able to share their knowledge and skills (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

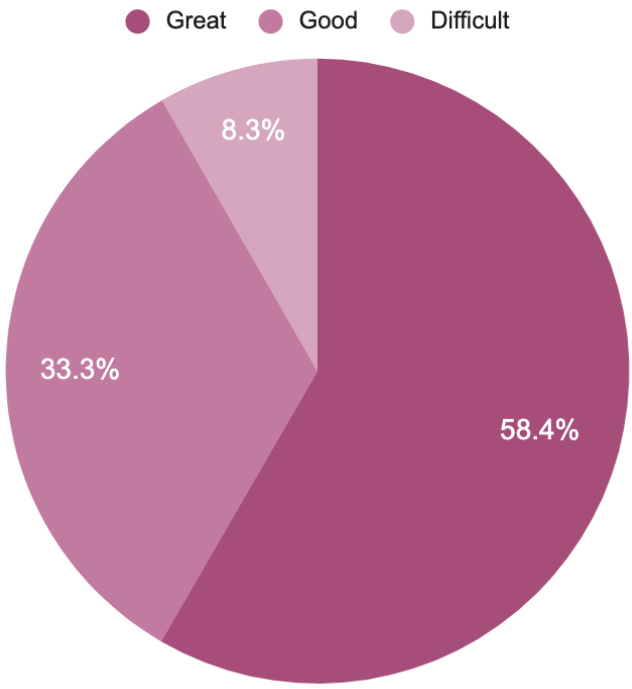
Mentor Teacher’s Perceived Ability to Share Skills & Knowledge



Nearly all mentor teacher respondents (91.6%) described their experiences this year as "good" or "great" with only one respondent describing her experience as "difficult" (see Figure 8). In this case, "good" or "great" described positive forms of engagement or interaction of the early childhood college student with the classroom, children and mentor teacher. "Difficult" described a scenario in which the college student caused an extra burden to the mentor teacher.

Figure 8

Overall Mentor Teacher Experience



Written Responses

Written responses to the survey provided additional insights. Ten teachers communicated appreciation for the student's contribution to the classroom and saw potential for future early childhood educators. One respondent commented, "Having an additional adult in the classroom who desires to help kids grow and learn is an asset to everyone!" Another stated, "Teacher training is extremely important. Hands-on real-time experience is so valuable for all. It is good for preschoolers and the college students alike. Making connections with students, kiddos and staff is beneficial for learning."

When asked *how* they were able to share their knowledge, expertise and experience, the answers varied. Four mentor teachers explained that they were able to model teaching and behavior management, "She [was] able to see different accommodations we use with children, ways to get children engaged into activities with hands on materials." Two teachers were able to

explain what they were doing while engaged in teaching, "We explained what we were doing and for what reasons and gave information to support our teachings." Two mentor teachers were able to take time during rest or lunch to further explain and invite the student to ask additional questions. One of those commented, "I was able to have conversations with the MNC students after class regarding our day, the purpose of certain activities, and classroom management."

One concern of mentor teachers was that they often did not know what the college student's goals were during their time in the classroom. They explained that it would be nice to know which course they were enrolled in so that they could tailor what or how they shared to the student's needs. Several were curious about what the students felt they gained from their experiences. Mentor teachers also requested that college faculty keep in contact with them regarding students, goals and expectations. Finally, the mentor teachers expressed concern about last-minute scheduling and duration of time in the classroom. Multiple mentor teachers expressed that they didn't feel the student was able to get a true picture of the classroom because they were there for such a limited amount of time.

Program Alignment

A rubric was developed with three categories for alignment: scaffolded field experiences, mentor teacher relationships and reflective practice (see Appendix B). The criteria for each category were developed based on Minnesota's Knowledge and Competency Framework for Early Childhood Professionals (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021), the components of high-quality field experiences from NAEYC's Higher Education Accreditation Standards (2021), and current research on the subject. One point was awarded for "limited alignment", three points for "moderate alignment" and five points for "excellent alignment." A total of 15 points were possible. Evaluation of the current program's field experience resulted in a score of 5/15 when

graded on these three criteria. Scaffolded experiences were scored a one, mentor relationships a two and reflective practice a two. The score reflects a limited to moderate alignment to research-based components of quality field experiences for early childhood education students.

Areas of Strength

The data reveals specific areas of strength related to quality field experiences for Minnesota North's early childhood education students. First, college students and mentor teachers alike value field experiences, as indicated by high response rates and overall positive feedback. Students view their time in the classrooms as rich learning experiences. An average of 63.9% of students perceive field experiences as "rich" learning, no matter the type (group, paired or individual). While only 53.8% of mentor teachers were provided a choice in their roles, the vast majority (92.3%) would definitely or possibly consider serving in the role in the future. This demonstrates a willingness to serve and positive perceptions of field experiences for mentor teachers.

Students also value the mentor teachers and the learning they stand to gain from interacting with them. Every student response (100%) indicated that their learning was "rich" when they were able to interact with the mentor teachers and the majority (83.3%) felt that simply observing them resulted in "rich" learning. Early childhood education students look to their mentor teachers to help them bridge the gap between content knowledge and real life experience. The positive view of the student-mentor relationship and the potential for authentic learning is certainly a strength.

Mentor teachers seem to appreciate having students in their classrooms and some have independently taken advantage of the opportunity to pass on their knowledge and skills. Based

on their written responses, teachers appreciate having extra help from the college students. However, their positive perceptions are not limited to the ways they personally benefit. Several teachers mentioned their desire to share "...just how fun the job can be when done well!" Some of those teachers even got creative in carving out time from their busy days to make meaningful connections with the college students. A few examples they provided in the survey include commentary embedded in their teaching, asking or answering questions during wait times, or taking a minute after class to discuss what went on throughout the day. Our community is fortunate to have partner organizations and experienced early childhood classroom teachers who not only enjoy their careers, but are also willing to contribute to the profession by investing in Minnesota North's college students.

In addition, early childhood education students show commitment to utilizing field experiences for their own learning. Time sheet data reveals that the college students tend to show up on time on the scheduled days and times that they are expected. They take ownership of the experiences and look forward to them. The majority are excited to be in the classroom and value the learning they glean from field experiences.

Areas for Growth

The data reveals a few areas for growth as well. One area relates to scaffolding field experiences. A score of one out of five was assigned on the best practices rubric (see Appendix B). When students are assigned a classroom for independent field experiences with little guidance from faculty, the quality of learning falls short of its potential (Han et al., 2021; Hojeij et al., 2021; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Kennedy & Lees 2017). To increase the quality of learning, the program will need to provide scaffolded field experiences, structuring for a gradual release of independence.

Another area for improvement is better support for mentor teachers in their role, beginning with providing all mentor teachers a choice in whether or not to host a student in their classrooms. Providing mentors with information about the program as a whole and the developmental trajectory of student learning and experiences will also improve their ability to more fully participate in the mentor role. Faculty can also improve the relationship by providing contact information and ongoing, timely communication. To value the mentor teachers and maximize their potential for contribution to the early childhood education student's experience and learning is to promote growth.

Finally, growth is needed in the use of a developmental model for reflective practice. Reflection, whether in a group or independent, is inconsistent across all courses in the program and does not follow a developmental trajectory. Although varying formats for reflection are used, reflective practice is not first modeled and then practiced before becoming an independent exercise for learning and developing as a student and professional. Reflective practice has been proven as a powerful tool for increased learning in tandem with field experiences (Hojeij, et al., 2021; Lux et al., 2022).

The data shows that both early childhood education students and mentor teachers value field experiences. Students are, for the most part, highly engaged and desire to make the most of the learning opportunity provided through time spent in a real classroom. They value all opportunities, including group, paired and independent field experiences and perceive rich learning happening from group, paired and independent reflection. Both college students and mentor teachers value *one another* and desire to interact more often in order to provide the richest learning experiences for future early childhood educators. The results of the study support improvement in three areas: scaffolded field experiences, mentor relationships, and

reflective practice.

Action Plan

In order to improve the quality of field experiences for early childhood education students at Minnesota North College, a number of action items will be addressed. First, a framework for scaffolded field experiences will be developed so that students begin the two-year program with group field experiences, progress toward paired experiences and develop into independent field experiences. The system of supports explained hereafter reflects the unique developmental needs of Minnesota North College early childhood students and our community partners (Han et al., 2021; Hojeij, 2021; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Kennedy & Lees, 2017).

Next, the relationship and role of the mentor teacher will be defined in three progressive levels. In this way, mentor teachers will have a clear understanding of how their role changes as students progress through their own learning. Not only that, but it will also provide mentors with the information they need to maximize the relationship for learning (see Appendix C). These levels of mentor teacher engagement are based on research suggesting that when mentor teachers are well-equipped with information about their role and purposefully positioned in the field experience framework, early childhood education students are provided a high-quality learning experience (Ben-Harush & Orland-Barak, 2019; Lux, et al., 2022; Simsar & Jones, 2021).

Finally reflection, as it relates to experiences in the classroom, will also follow a developmental trajectory. Faculty will begin by modeling reflection within a group while students practice the concept together. Progressively, students will practice reflection with a partner who has shared a similar field experience and then students will be asked to demonstrate their own independent reflective practice. By doing so, early childhood education students gain needed skills for reflection that will benefit their practice throughout their careers (Fukkink et al.,

2019; Hojeij et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

Scaffolded Field Experiences

Upon beginning their first semester, student's first field experiences will be in a group format. In this approach, faculty will be present during the experience to guide, explain, and help students make connections between course content and what they observe. Students will also be assigned one synchronous partner experience during the second half of this semester in which they will be making observations in the same classroom and at the same time as one other college student. In semesters two and three, students will increasingly gain independence as they progress from group experiences to synchronous and asynchronous pairs to independent field experiences. Table 1 presents this progression using gradient shading to show increasing independence in field experiences.

Table 1

Framework for Scaffolded Field Experiences

Scaffolded Field Experiences					
	NA or Guests	**Group**	**Synchronous Pairs**	**Asynchronous Pairs**	**Independent**
Semester 1	X	X	X		
Semester 2		X	X	X	
Semester 3				X	X
Semester 4		X			X

Mentor Teacher Role

To align Minnesota North College's early childhood program with research related to the role of the mentor teacher, three levels of mentor teacher engagement have been defined. In level one, the mentor teacher's role is primarily that of a model. In level two, the mentor teacher increases engagement with the early childhood education student and functions more as a guide. The level three role of the mentor teacher may best be described as a collaborative teacher (see Table 2).

Table 2

Levels of Mentor Teacher Roles

Mentor Teacher Role		
	Student Role	**Teacher Role**
Level 1	• Observes • Guided interaction with children. • Asks questions.	• Models professional practice. • Directs student interaction with children. • Provides answers to student questions.
Level 2	• Guided and spontaneous interaction with children. • Observes and dialogues with the teachers regarding	• Guides and encourages interaction with children. • Models and occasionally explains various teaching or

	teaching strategies or classroom management techniques.	classroom management strategies.
Level 3	• Observes • Asks questions • Spontaneously interacts with children • Participates in all aspects of the classroom (meetings, planning, etc). • Looks to the teachers as a resource for making connections between content knowledge and developmentally appropriate practice. • Collaborates with the teacher to plan two leadership experiences. • Receives feedback.	• Demonstrates • Provides encouragement • Invites the student into all aspects of the classroom (meetings, planning, etc). • Helps the student make connections between content knowledge and developmentally appropriate practice. • Collaborates with the student to plan two leadership experiences. • Observes the student. • Provides feedback.

Reflective Practice

A framework for developing reflective practice skills in early childhood education students is based on research that concludes that students who engage in reflective practice make deeper connections between content knowledge and classroom experience *and* improve the reflective practice skills that will be needed to continually improve pedagogy (Fukkink et al., 2019; Hojeij et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). The framework developed for Minnesota North's early childhood education program provides scaffolded reflection modalities in tandem with field experiences. During the first semester, faculty models reflection in a group dialogic format. During the second semester, faculty guides students as they increase their independence during group dialogic reflections and students participate in paired reflections with those who have shared field experiences, whether synchronous or asynchronous. In the third semester, students complete group and paired reflection and increase the amount of independent reflection. Finally, in the fourth semester, students primarily reflect independently, but continue to benefit from group reflection (see Table 3).

Table 3

Framework for Reflective Practice

Reflective Practice			
	Group Dialogic	**Paired**	**Independent**
Semester 1	X		
Semester 2	X	X	
Semester 3	X	X	X
Semester 4	X		X

By creating a plan of action for improvement of the quality of field experiences in the early childhood education program at Minnesota North College, students stand to gain significant learning that is responsive to their development as early childhood educators. Experiences in the field begin as group exposure and progress toward engaged, hands-on, independent learning (Han et al., 2021; Hojeij et al., 2021; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Kennedy & Lees 2017). Skills in reflection develop through modeling and practice in group dialogue, paired dialogue and independent reflection (Fukkink et al., 2019; Hojeij et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Mentor teachers and students alike understand their roles at each level of engagement in order to bridge content knowledge and pedagogy (Epstein & Wilhite, 2015; Kennedy & Lees, 2017). Together, these create a foundation for high quality learning to occur during field experiences embedded throughout all four semesters of coursework.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

Timeline

To increase the quality of field experiences in the areas of scaffolded experiences, reflective practice and mentor teacher roles, program faculty will evaluate and align courses based on the quality field experiences rubric (see Appendix B). This will take place from May to August 2023. To address the needed changes as they relate to mentor teacher relationships, program faculty will meet with community partners in May of 2023 to present the research findings and make suggestions for improvement. These include allowing mentor teachers a choice in whether or not to participate, providing mentor teachers direct contact with faculty and establishing an informational, one-hour, training opportunity for mentor teachers. The training opportunity could take place during the annual staff training in August 2023.

Faculty and community partners will meet the first week in October 2023, to pair early childhood education students with mentor teachers for fall semester. They will do the same the third week in December 2023, in preparation for spring semester. Faculty will notify mentor teachers and early childhood education students of the assignments within one week of the pairing meetings. Faculty will check in with mentor teachers at the end of each semester regarding the changes. College faculty, community partners and mentor teachers will meet to debrief the year in May of 2024.

Faculty Responsibilities

Minnesota North College faculty bear the majority of the responsibility in carrying out the program improvements described. Faculty will ensure that both the developmental trajectories of field experiences and reflective practice are embedded within existing coursework. In addition, faculty will schedule meetings to collaborate with community partners to make the few mentor teacher relationship changes and schedule the pairing meetings each semester. College faculty will plan and facilitate the one-hour training for mentor teachers in August. Finally, faculty will work with community partners, mentor teachers and students to maintain open and positive communication throughout field experiences, as well as facilitate ongoing assessment of the improvements.

Community Partner Responsibilities

Community partners, who are administrators of local early childhood programs, will continue to collaborate with Minnesota North faculty to provide quality classrooms and mentor teachers for field experiences. They will meet with college faculty in May, October and December and be available via email or a requested meeting to address any ongoing challenges.

Community partners will also select quality teachers to serve as mentors to early childhood education students and encourage them to step into the role. In addition, program administrators will support their staff in the mentor role and address any needs that may arise, looping in college faculty if necessary.

Mentor Teacher Responsibilities

Classroom teachers will volunteer to serve as mentors to early childhood education students from Minnesota North. In doing so, they will be provided with information about the developmental framework of coursework and field experiences at Minnesota North's Itasca campus. This, along with information about the three levels of the mentor teacher role, will be presented at a one-hour training in August. With that information, classroom teachers will be equipped to independently mentor the students who are present in their classroom throughout the year. They will have the autonomy to decide what works best in their setting, with their particular class and taking into account their own styles and personalities, as well as those of the college students paired to their classroom. Finally, mentor teachers will complete a Google form at the end of each semester and attend a meeting in May to provide feedback and collaborate with other mentor teachers to build best practices within the role.

Data Collection

At the end of each semester, a Google form will be sent to mentor teachers and early childhood education students in order to collect data about the quality of field experiences within the program. The survey will identify strengths and areas for growth within the program. Ongoing adjustments to scaffolded experience, reflective practice or mentor teacher relationships may be made based on the data collected. Additional data will be gathered from an end-of-year

meeting with mentor teachers and program administrators. Data from the Google surveys will be shared and analyzed with the attendees. They will also have an opportunity to discuss their experiences and collaborate to develop best practices for field experiences.

Limitations

A potential limitation to successful implementation of these program improvements is the willingness of mentor teachers to participate. While the survey data revealed that most mentor teachers will volunteer for the role when provided a choice to do so, it is possible that allowing this choice, rather than an assignment, may result in fewer mentor teachers to host early childhood education students. However, research suggests that improving the training and experience of mentor teachers increases their self-efficacy in the role and therefore produces a high-quality field experience for all parties (Han et al, 2021; Kennedy & Lees, 2015; Visser-Jones & Liu, 2022).

Another challenge for mentor teachers, based on research and survey data analysis, is time (Kennedy & Lees, 2015). There is always a high demand for a teacher's time throughout the day, and fitting extra responsibilities related to the mentor teacher role into the contracted workday may prove difficult. Some teachers may find the added burden of time spent interacting with an early childhood college student, possibly at the cost of time spent in preparation or in addressing classroom needs, to be more than they can easily invest. In order to alleviate this burden for mentor teachers, day-to-day expectations for additional time requirements are very limited and the format for such interactions are at their discretion.

Conclusion

Research shows that field experiences are a highly impactful means of learning for early

childhood education students as they create meaningful connections between the content knowledge learned in coursework and experiential knowledge found within the early childhood classroom (Fukkink et al., 2019; Hooks et al., 2019; Linn & Jacobs, 2015; Visser-Jones & Liu, 2022). Quality field experiences include a developmental trajectory of experiences, positive mentor teacher relationships and the inclusion of reflective practice. While the early childhood program at Minnesota North College requires a high number of field experience hours, they do not necessarily include the components of quality found in the research.

In line with prior research on the topic, data analysis revealed that early childhood education students perceive a richer learning experience when engaged with a group or with a partner than individually. In order to create quality field experiences that provide the richest learning opportunities, a framework was developed for the program that is scaffolded. Students' first field experiences will be completed as a group, with guidance from faculty. Later, students will complete their field experience hours with a partner, either synchronously or asynchronously in the same classroom with the same mentor teacher. Finally, early childhood education students will independently engage in early childhood classrooms. By utilizing a developmental trajectory of experiences, the student will be fully prepared to make meaningful connections at every stage.

Minnesota North College’s community partnerships are strong. Working within those partnerships are mentor teachers who are willing to create space in their classrooms for college students as well as provide them with real-time mentorship in the field. Data analysis brought to light a few ways in which mentor teachers can be supported and communicated with that will not only clarify their roles, but also improve the quality of their relationships with Minnesota North’s early childhood education students. In response to research and the findings from data, three

levels of mentor engagement were developed that align with the developmental trajectory of field experiences for students. In level one interactions, the mentor teacher functions as a model. Level two interactions add the role of guide. Finally, in level three, mentor teachers interact with college students as model, guide, and teacher. Clarifying mentor teacher roles and improving the relationships between mentor and mentee will increase the quality of learning for early childhood education students.

Research showed that reflective practice is a necessity in the field of education and that incorporating it into field experiences increases the quality of learning for college students (Foong et al., 2018; Hojeij et al., 2021; Jenset et al., 2018; Lux et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). To better align Minnesota North's current early childhood program with components of quality reflective practice in field experiences, a developmental framework was created. Similarly to the field experiences themselves, reflection will first be modeled and practiced in a group setting. Then, students will reflect with partners who have experienced the same classroom setting. Finally, college students will be equipped and expected to complete independent reflection of their field experiences. By embedding reflective practice, early childhood education students will gain the greatest amount of learning from each field experience.

The early childhood program at Minnesota North's Itasca campus has significant strengths related to field experiences already. Improvements made to aligning quality field experiences and reflective practices with a developmental trajectory as well as defining the role of the mentor teacher while supporting that relationship stand to produce an *excellent* program. Not only this, but these improvements have the potential to impact the future workforce within the field of early childhood. "...Research points to higher retention rates and greater teacher efficacy among new teachers prepared in... [quality] clinically based programs" (Lux et al, 2022,

p. 273). Indeed, the rationale for quality field experiences in Minnesota North's early childhood education program reaches beyond the campus, beyond the classrooms and into the lives of the very young.

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Appendix A

Student Observation Agreement

Student Observer will:

▢ Arrive to the classroom at scheduled time.

▢ Notify classroom teacher if unable to attend & reschedule.

▢ Be professional in appearance & manner.

▢ Maintain confidentiality at all times.

▢ Learn from experience.

▢ Engage with children in a positive, helpful manner.

▢ Be an extra set of eyes and ears & let staff know if someone needs their attention.

▢ Look for opportunities to be a help to the students and staff (tidy up, tie shoes, etc)

▢ Ask staff how to be of help if unsure.

▢ Leave cell phone & hot beverages in the car or bag.

▢ Always be with a staff person (never alone with children).

Classroom Staff will:

▢ Be solely responsible for the redirection or discipline of children.

▢ Complete all personal cares for children (diaper changes, bathroom needs, etc).

▢ Speak with parents about the child or classroom concerns.

▢ Answer the telephone or door.

▢ Complete all documentation required in the classroom.

▢ Not share confidential information with the Student Observer.

▢ Model professionalism & a positive manner.

▢ Ask the Student Observer to help with appropriate tasks.

▢ Answer any questions the Student Observer may have about the program, classroom, or the Early Childhood field.

▢ Sign or initial the Student Observer's observation log at the end of each day.

▢ Contact program coordinator if any issues arise.

Appendix B

Program Alignment with Quality Field Experiences Rubric

	1 Limited Alignment	3 Moderate Alignment	5 Excellent Alignment
Scaffolded Experiences Gradual release independence over 4 semesters High levels of direct faculty involvement during early experiences, tapering to lower levels of direct faculty involvement. Large group, paired synchronous, paired asynchronous, independence.	More than one type of field experience is offered. Little or no consideration for developmental trajectory or scaffolding of field experiences. Faculty is responsible for assigning students to classrooms and for accountability.	A variety of experiences including group, partner and independent Some consideration given to developmental trajectory and scaffolding. Faculty is involved occasionally and/or without intentionality.	Gradual release of independence over 4 semesters. High levels of direct faculty involvement during early field experiences, tapering to lower levels of direct faculty involvement. Large group → paired synchronous → paired asynchronous → independence.
Mentor Relationships Mentor teachers take ownership in the role. Mentor teachers are trained. Mentor teachers offer experience-based knowledge and skills. Mentor teachers solicit questions from EC students.	Mentor teachers are assigned based on teacher quality and current classroom culture. Training is limited or inconsistent. Mentor teacher is primarily being observed, rather than explicitly sharing experiential knowledge & skills or discussing student questions.	Mentor teachers volunteer for the role. Training is offered. Communication between student, mentor teacher, faculty & administration is as-needed. Mentor teachers model their knowledge and skills. Opportunities for conversation and questioning is student-directed.	Mentor teachers volunteer and take ownership in their role. Training is provided. Communication between student, mentor teacher, faculty & administration is consistent.. Mentor teachers are provided opportunities to share their experience-based knowledge & skills. Mentor teachers solicit questions from EC students.
Reflective Practice Reflection is modeled by faculty and mentor teachers. Reflective practice follows a developmental trajectory: -Group -Partner or small group -Independent	Reflection is not modeled first. Reflection is integrated into most field experiences without regard to developmental trajectory.	Reflection is modeled within a group by faculty Reflection is integrated into all field experiences, but may not be linked to developmental trajectory.	Reflection is first modeled by faculty. Reflection is modeled by mentor teachers. Reflection is integrated into all field experiences based on developmental trajectory.

Appendix C

Field Experiences at Minnesota North College, Itasca Campus

Semster	Curse	# Hours	Scaffolded Field Experience	Mentor Relationship	Reflection
1FS	ECED 1202 Child Development	0	Guests	N/A	Group Dialogic
1A	EDUC 1300 Foundations of Early Childhood	16	Group	Level 1	Group Dialogic
1B	ECED 1207 Children's Health, Safety & Nutrition	16	Group Synchronous Pairs	Level 1	Group Dialogic
2B	ECED 1206 Diverse Children & Family Relations	16	Group	Level 1	Group Dialogic
2A	ECED 1205 Relations & Management	16	Synchronous or Asynchronous Pairs	Level 2	Paired Reflection
3A	ECED 1203 Observation & Assessment	16	Asynchronous Pairs	Level 2	Pairs & Independent
3FS	ECED 2134 Language & Literacy	10	Independent	Level 2	Independent
4A	ECED 2132 Special Needs in Early Childhood	16	Independent	Level 2	Group, Pairs & Independent
4B	ECED 2133 Creative Activities & Environments	16	Group Independent	NA	Group Dialogic Independent

4FS	ECED 2122 Internship	134	Independent	Level 3	Independent