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What Do They Think? Families Share Benefits of an After-School Tutoring Program

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What Do They Think? Families Share Benefits of an After-School Tutoring Program

Tammy Zilliox and Teresa Young

Introduction

There are many afterschool programs that provide tutoring services for K–8 elementary students. The frameworks vary with some focusing on homework assistance and others addressing specific content knowledge. These programs can be beneficial to elementary students and assist families with needed academic support. Although much research has been conducted on the benefits field experiences have for preservice teachers, and even more research on the impact family engagement has on student achievement, little research has been focused on how embedded field experiences benefit not only preservice teachers but also family engagement.

Embedded field experiences in teacher preparation provide preservice teachers opportunities to acquire practical experience when enrolled in a university course (Hilaski et al., 2021). These opportunities take place during class time and under the professor's supervision, thus allowing the professor to serve as a mentor to "provide feedback that is responsive, ongoing, and specific" (p. 41). This research study posits embedded field experiences not only benefit preservice teachers but also participating families.

Previous Study

A previous study (Zilliox & Young, 2024) analyzed the benefits of an embedded field experience for preservice teachers in a Literacy Assessment course. Specifically, the class was created to enhance literacy knowledge and instructional practices for preservice teachers. The three-credit-hour course consisted of both content learning and field experience. A tutoring partnership was established with a neighborhood school district providing the preservice teachers with one-hour tutoring sessions for eight weeks with the elementary students. The purpose of the tutoring partnership was for the preservice teachers to understand that teaching reading is the process of using literacy assessment data to guide reading instruction. The university students were required to administer and analyze data from formal and informal literacy assessments. From this analysis, they developed and implemented strategies and resources for classroom use. They examined the needs of the tutee, his/her engagement, and then used specific instructional strategies to improve literacy knowledge. This was most beneficial for the university students as they fully experienced a theory-to-practice approach during the tutoring sessions.

Using a Convergent Mixed Methods Design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), survey responses from 17 preservice teachers and grades from their three course assignments were triangulated to identify the benefits the preservice teachers gained from the course's embedded field experience. All data was collected during the last two weeks of the course to allow for maximum time in the field as well as time to analyze the student data and reflect upon the overall field experience. The researchers found that embedded field experiences increased preservice teachers' understanding of literacy assessments and emphasized the importance of using data to guide instruction (Zilliox & Young, 2024).

Moreover, two major benefits for preservice teachers in embedded field experiences were identified: 1) connecting course content with instructional implementation, and 2) receiving ongoing guidance, support, and feedback from certified literacy instructors (Zilliox & Young, 2024). A continuous cycle of assessment for literacy instruction and reflection of the process was deemed beneficial as it served as practical application for a classroom setting. The tutored elementary students were provided literacy instruction that met their needs and goals; data analysis indicated a growth in their literacy skills and reading enjoyment. These benefits increased the preservice teachers' understanding of literacy assessments and allowed for effective planning and implementation of literacy activities. Furthermore, embedded field experiences provided benefits to the community they served by offering additional literacy instruction at no cost to the schools or families and building relationships between universities and local school districts. The after-school tutoring program allowed for further engagement opportunities for families and the university community.

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study was to gather feedback from families whose children participated in embedded field experience. This research was a continuation of the aforementioned study that concluded embedded field experiences have several benefits for preservice teachers (Zilliox & Young, 2024). For both studies, embedded field experience was defined as practical teaching experiences with K–12 students that directly coincide with university coursework. The preservice teachers specifically benefitted from the opportunity to learn literacy content and instructional strategies while participating in field experiences and tutoring children. Because the embedded field experience served a public school with free after-school literacy tutoring, stakeholders of the study pondered how the participating families viewed the tutoring program. Thus, this research study posed the following question: How beneficial are university field experiences to participating families?

Literature Review

Much research supports the practice of embedded field experiences as a means for better teacher preparation. Lipp and Helfrich (2016) found, "Pairing course and field work proved to be a successful experience for preservice teachers in terms of growing understandings around best practice literacy" (p. 59). Their study of 11 preservice teachers began with a survey to determine the teachers' knowledge of two common literacy practices: running records and guided reading. Course content then followed using various resources to understand the importance of running records, how to administer and analyze running records, and the purpose and instructional procedures for guided reading. Without any professional teaching experience or acquired teaching license, the participants were placed in K–3 classrooms for four weeks and were assigned to a small reading group of three to six children. Each participant administered a running record assessment on each child to identify reading level, literacy strengths, and targeted areas for reading instruction at the beginning of the field experience. The participants then planned and implemented 12 guided reading lessons to their assigned reading group and administered a running record assessment again at the end of the four weeks for progress

monitoring purposes. Two reflection questions were given to preservice teachers during the field experience, and a post-survey was given after the completed field experience.

Preliminary data from this research indicated the preservice teachers had limited to no understanding of running records or guided reading even though they were regarded as important literacy instructional approaches (Lipp & Helfrich, 2016). However, the "post surveys and reflections revealed clearer understandings of running records and guided reading and their importance in relation to literacy instruction" (p. 55). Preservice teachers felt well-equipped to implement running records and guided reading instruction by the end of the course. Therefore, embedding field experience into an education course better prepares preservice teachers to use "best practice literacy instruction through their opportunities to experience live teaching" in a classroom (p. 59).

Another embedded field experience research was conducted by Hilaski et al. (2021). Their research consisted of 13 undergraduate preservice teachers enrolled in a dual-certification program while taking a Literacy Assessment course. Class time included one hour of course content, 45 minutes of field experience, followed by reflection and seminar discussions. Using a qualitative content analytic method, the researchers collected data from interviews, coursework, and audio recordings of class discussions throughout the course.

After a three-phase coding analysis of the collected data, it was revealed that "integrating more practice-based methodologies, such as embedded clinical experiences, provides a means to authentic, practical learning and varied levels of scaffolding" for preservice teachers (Hilaski et al., 2021, p. 41). The participants of this research study felt better prepared in planning and adjusting for instruction, identifying the purpose of and analyzing assessment data, and overall understanding of what constitutes skilled reading and supports struggling readers. The preservice teachers' instruction during the field experience time "moved from teacher centered to student centered, given that planning and implementation were responsive to students' needs" (p. 33). Therefore, embedded field experiences in teacher preparation provided preservice teachers with opportunities to acquire practical experience when enrolled in a university course. "Field placements that are isolated from coursework, as well as limited supervision during field placements, also lead to underprepared novice teachers" (p. 23).

In addition to better preparation for preservice teachers, field experiences can be designed to connect university classrooms to surrounding communities. "In the United States, preservice teachers often graduate and go on to work with students whose backgrounds are different from their own and in communities in which they have limited lived experiences" (Beaudry, 2015, p. 29). However, it is imperative that preservice teachers become aware of and attentive to the experiences of the students they teach as well as the communities in which they live. Community-based field experience can be a "powerful approach to encourage preservice teachers to consider issues related to community, education, diversity, and equity by providing opportunities for personal experiences related to these issues" (p. 30).

Beaudry (2015) conducted inquiry-based research using three preservice teachers' narratives of a community-based field experience utilizing field texts such as journals, reflections, syllabus, and interview transcripts. This researcher found that the preservice teachers acquired "layered and

multiple perspectives on how community-based field experiences might encourage consideration of issues related to community, education, and diversity in ways that promote and support responsive teaching and learning practices" (p. 31). Thus, providing more opportunities for preservice teachers to interact with the community that surrounds the university promotes and supports responsive teaching and learning practices. Beaudry noted, "It is crucial that instructors serve as facilitators to guide (preservice teachers) as they engage in making meaning of their [community-based field] experiences and assist them in making connection between their learning and teaching" (p. 31).

Research from these three studies revealed embedded field experiences within university courses best prepare preservice teachers for teaching in real classrooms. What these studies do not include are the possible benefits families receive when their children participate in embedded field experiences with preservice teachers. Additionally, many state standards for the teaching profession include collaboration and communication with parents and the community to support student learning. Teachers must demonstrate clear and effective communication and share responsibility with parents and caregivers to support student learning, emotional and physical development, and mental health (Ohio Standards for the Teaching Profession, #6). The following research supports the importance of embedded field experiences, not just for better preparing preservice teachers in instruction, but also to improve family engagement and teacher communication.

Educating School Teachers (Levine, 2006) identified early career teachers were ill-equipped when communicating with families. The report indicated that 21% of principals surveyed thought teachers were not prepared to "work with parents" (Table 5, p. 33). However, when university deans of education schools were asked if this skill should be included in teacher preparation programs, 71% of the deans surveyed responded "Yes" (Table 6, p. 34). In the report, of the four "exemplary teacher education programs" only one mentioned a requirement of their preservice teachers regarding parent or family communication. This requirement was expected during the final internship of the preservice teaching experiences in which "they participate in grading and parent-teacher conferences" (p. 89). In the 142-page document, any type of ongoing communication with families to support student achievement, requiring a family engagement project, or participating in a community event where the school is located was not included or suggested. Furthermore, Levine's (2015) report highlighted that communication between families and preservice teachers was often non-existent in teacher preparation programs. Typical field experiences limit preservice teachers to the classroom with only the mentor teacher and university faculty for support.

Implementing a literacy tutoring approach, Carter and Abbott (2024) conducted a research study to not only provide preservice teachers with experience in lesson planning, assessments, and differentiation, but the tutoring also included opportunities for preservice teachers to communicate with parents and implement behavior management strategies. Using a case study design, Carter and Abbott (2024) collected data over two semesters from a literacy clinic that was university-based. Participants were enrolled in a semester-long literacy assessment course that included two, one-hour sessions of tutoring over 10 weeks. Each participant completed reflections before, during, and after the 10 weeks of tutoring to document their experiences and perceptions as they taught literacy for the first time to elementary students. From the 35

participants, over 400 reflections were analyzed and coded using a three-level coding scheme and included explicit and implied statements by them.

Three themes emerged from the coding: "planning and delivering quality instruction," "understanding students and families," and "realizing what it takes to be a teacher" (Carter & Abbott, 2021, pp. 6–8). For this literature review, the second theme is of most importance. Before the tutoring began, preservice teachers were concerned about how to build rapport with students and interact with families "in a way that was informative but not overwhelming" (p. 7). Field requirements for each preservice teacher included hosting a parent conference and writing a formal report to the family that explains assessment results, instruction, and recommendations. By the end of the 10-week tutoring session, "Every candidate across both semesters reflected positively in some way about their parent communication" (p. 8). Thus, this study adds to the previous research that field experiences need to include not only lesson planning, assessing, and implementing, but also practical applications for family communication and family engagement opportunities.

Methodology

To determine the benefits for participating families, this study was designed to collect family feedback on an existing after-school tutoring program that utilized a course-embedded field experience. The course-embedded field experience was in a school that serves a population of K–5 students. The targeted population was parents or guardians of students who participated in the Spring 2024 session of the after-school tutoring program (n=13).

Participation in the research study was completely voluntary and anonymous to the researchers. With the benefits of an embedded afterschool tutoring program determined, a quantitative survey was designed to gather feedback from the parents and caregivers (Appendix A). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), this type of survey provides a quantitative description of trends, attitudes, and opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. The survey was created using the Qualtrics platform and distributed via email to participants using a three-phrase process:

1. Notification of the survey was included in the weekly email update the week prior to the survey beginning.
2. The actual email for the survey, including the survey link, was sent the final week of tutoring.
3. A follow-up email was sent one week after the survey link was shared as a reminder to those who may not have yet completed it.

The final survey included 10 prompts using a five-point Likert scale from "none" to "very" (Appendix A). In addition, closed-ended prompts were included instead of open-ended prompts to increase the likelihood participants would complete the survey. Analysis and interpretation of the data was conducted by the researchers to identify what aspects of the after-school tutoring program were most valuable to families. Data was tabled and charted to allow for easy interpretation of the survey results.

Data and Findings

The setting was a small, urban public school consisting of grades K–5 in a building of 265 students. The survey prompts (Appendix A) were designed to be brief and reflect parents' perspectives on the tutoring program. The survey was sent to 13 parents with 10 responses. Five consented and five did not. Four of the five surveys were completed and analyzed. From the responses, each question was reviewed to determine parents and caregivers' perceptions of the after-school tutoring program. Table 1 includes the findings from the survey.

Table 1
Survey Interpretations

Overall Satisfaction	Growth in Literacy	Literacy Instruction
100% of participants were satisfied or extremely satisfied with the after-school tutoring program.	Phonics and comprehension were seen as areas of most literacy growth.	50% stated guided instruction was most beneficial.
100% stated weekly email updates supported literacy at home.	75% of the participants saw an increase in their child's reading grade.	25% stated read-alouds for fluency were beneficial.
75% are very likely to sign up again for the program.	Participants felt their children's enjoyment of reading increased.	25% stated extra reading and writing support was beneficial.

Prompts one through three elicited general information such as grade level, number of days per week the student participated, and the type of tutoring setting such as small group or individual. Prompt four asked for the family's overall satisfaction. Prompts five through eight specifically asked families to rate the benefits of the tutoring program for their children. Prompt nine focused on how email communications throughout the program supported literacy efforts at home. The final prompt gauged the likelihood of future participation. The survey prompts provided enough information for the authors to determine the families' perspectives of the after-school tutoring program and if it was beneficial.

Specifically, all four survey responses were marked satisfied or extremely satisfied with the after-school tutoring program. Regarding academic performance, three participants indicated their child's reading grade improved. One family member indicated the reading test score for the student increased. Two of the four participants indicated their children had the most growth in phonics, and the other two indicated comprehension was most improved. An important outcome of the after-school tutoring program was that all participants felt their children's enjoyment of reading increased.

Families also responded favorably when describing their child's literacy instruction through the after-school tutoring program. Two respondents indicated the most beneficial aspect of the tutoring program was guided instruction at the child's reading level. One indicated the importance of reading aloud to build fluency, and the fourth indicated the extra support in both reading and writing was most beneficial. Weekly emails that provided literacy strategy ideas for

families to complete with their children were highly rated and beneficial, at least most of the time. Strategies such as reading aloud, creating books, journaling, games, and retelling stories were included in email communications. These practical aspects of the program as well as perceived positive literacy outcomes would increase the likelihood of future participation in the program as noted in the responses.

Conclusion

An important aspect of any after-school tutoring program is the family experience. Field experiences need to include not only lesson planning, assessment, and implementation strategies, but also practical applications for family communication and family engagement opportunities (Carter & Abbott, 2024). This research project aimed to determine family perspectives of an after-school tutoring program. The authors elicited feedback from the families of tutoring participants. We posited that collecting feedback from families would be an asset for both universities and communities when implementing similar field experiences in the future.

Although the sample size was small and a limitation of the study, the family responses indicated the after-school tutoring program was beneficial for the elementary students. Specifically, families noted that the weekly emails highlighting reading activities and ways to help at home were useful. The families appreciated understanding the child's summative record because the report provided information about the child's literacy strengths and needs along with at-home recommendations. Additionally, the families were eager to reenroll their child in the program.

According to parents in the study, a community-based, after-school tutoring program that included an embedded field experience course was beneficial for their child. Parents learned about reading activities and how guided instruction in the child's reading level supported their literacy knowledge. Weekly emails for communication connected families to the program, enhanced the partnership with the school, and factored into future participation. Findings from this study coupled with the identified benefits from the initial study (Zilliox & Young, 2024) highlighted the benefits of an embedded field experience in a university course for the university students' literacy growth, the K–5 students they serve, and their families.

Future Research

This study was a continuation of a previous study on embedded field experiences for university students. For this study, parent participation and feedback were gathered and analyzed. However, parent participation and responses were limited. Future research could focus on a larger sample size, and families could be interviewed to collect qualitative data to better understand why they found an afterschool tutoring program aligned with a university beneficial for the student participants.

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Appendix A

Survey Prompts

1. Grade level of child (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5)
2. Days per week (1, 2, or 3)
3. Tutoring settings (one-on-one, small group, or not sure)
4. Satisfaction of tutoring program (scale 1 to 5 with 1 extremely dissatisfied to 5 extremely satisfied)
5. Most beneficial to child
    a. Building relations with tutor
    b. Importance of read-aloud every week to build fluency
    c. Increase fondness for literacy

    d. Extra support for literacy
    e. Guided instruction at child's reading level
6. Area of most growth
    a. Phonics – ability to read individual words
    b. Vocabulary – understanding the meaning of words
    c. Fluency – ability to read at a conversational pace
    d. Comprehension – ability to understand what was read
    e. Writing – ability to write legible sentences
7. Increase in academic performance
    a. Reading grade improved
    b. Reading test scores improved
    c. Reading grade did not improve
    d. Reading test scores did not improve
    e. I did not see any improvement in my child's academic or test scores
8. Increase in child's overall enjoyment of reading (yes, no, maybe)
9. Email communication support literacy at home (yes, no, I did not receive emails)
10. Participate again (very likely, possible, not likely)