A Comparison of Preservice Teachers' Perceptions of Important Elements of the Student Teaching Experience Before and After a 14-Week Field Experience

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Introduction and Conceptual Framework

The student teaching experience is one of the most impactful components of any teacher preparatory program (Miller & Wilson, 2010). Deeds et al. (1991) claimed student teaching is one of the most critical components in the development of future agriculture teachers. Therefore, it is crucial that the student teaching experience is constructive as well as advantageous. Typically, the student teaching experience is completed over the course of only one semester in agricultural education. As such, it is beneficial to ensure the most important elements are taken into consideration and incorporated when planning for the student teaching experience. For teacher preparatory programs to provide effective student teaching opportunities, and adequately place student teachers with cooperating teachers, it is necessary to study the student teachers' perceptions of what elements are most important before and after the student teaching experience. It has been found the student teachers' perceived level of importance for each element of student teaching changes over the experience (Harlin et al., 2002; Young & Edwards, 2006). Young and Edwards (2006), recommended continued research on the important elements of the student teaching experience be conducted. This study aims to further previous research through replication with a population of pre-service teachers at the University of Florida. This study is framed using experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Roberts, 2006), which suggests learning is a process and "ideas are formed and re-formed through experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 26).

Methodology

The purpose of this descriptive study was to determine preservice teachers' perceptions of important elements of the student teaching experience both before and after the student teaching experience. This study aligns with research priority 4 of the national research agenda (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016). This study was a census (N = 19) of the preservice teachers in agricultural education at University of Florida in the spring of 2020. This census study consisted of 18 females and one male. The population was 94.7% White and 5.3% Hispanic. The size of student teaching placement sites ranged from 553 to 3,300 students with a mean of 1,537 students. The number of agricultural education teachers at each site ranged from one to four teachers with a mean of two teachers. The instrument used in this study, initially developed by Harlin et al. (2002), was divided into two main parts. The first part consisted of 35 items within five core elements of the student teaching experience, including (a) classroom and laboratory instruction (5 items), (b) student leadership development (FFA activities; 7 items), (c) cooperating teacher/student teacher relationships (9 items), (d) school and community relationships/resources (10 items), and (e) supervised agricultural experience programs (4 items). The students were asked to rate their perceived level of importance for each item using the following five-point Likert scale: 1 = *no importance*, 2 = *low importance*, 3 = *medium importance*, 4 = *much importance*, and 5 = *high importance*. The second part of the instrument consisted of items to determine the selected personal and professional demographics of the preservice teachers.

Findings

After analyzing the data, the items within the element of cooperating teacher/student teacher relationships had the highest means, with pretest means ranging from 4.00 to 5.00 and posttest means ranging from 4.05 to 5.00. In total, eight items displayed change in perceived importance from the pretest to posttest, including (a) a discipline management plan is used in a structured environment, (b) creative teaching methods as a basis for daily instruction (i.e., use of multimedia and varied teaching techniques), (c) opportunities for student teacher to

judge/monitor district/state CDEs, (d) recognized integrity of cooperating teacher, (e) availability of facilities (i.e., computer labs, shops, horticultural lab, land labs, school farm), (f) all students have an SAE requirement with accurate record books, (g) diversity within students' SAEs, and (h) student participation in advanced awards and degrees on all levels (see Table 1).

Table 1

Important Elements of the Student Teaching Experience

	Pre-test		Post-test	
Elements	M^a	SD^a	M^b	SD^b
Classroom and Laboratory Instruction				
A discipline management plan is used in a structured environment	4.53	.77	4.47	.70
Creative teaching methods as a basis for daily instruction	4.32	.82	4.68	.58
Student Leadership Development (FFA Activities)				
Opportunities for student teacher to judge/monitor district/state CDEs	3.47	1.02	3.79	.71
School and Community Relationships/Resources				
Recognized integrity of cooperating teacher	4.68	.48	4.42	.69
Availability of facilities	4.58	.51	4.63	.60
Supervised Agricultural Experience Programs				
All students have an SAE requirement, with accurate record books	3.95	.78	3.37	.76
Diversity within the students' SAEs	3.84	.83	3.47	.84
Student participation in advanced awards and degrees on all levels	3.42	1.07	3.68	.75

Conclusions

The preservice teachers perceived the most important element of the student teaching experience was the cooperating teacher/student teacher relationship, which is congruent with findings of Harlin et al. (2002) and Young and Edwards (2006). There was a negative change in the perceived level of importance of a discipline management plan is used in a structured environment and recognized integrity of the cooperating teacher from *high importance* to *much importance*. There was a positive change in the perceived level of importance of creative teaching methods as a basis for daily instruction and availability of facilities from *much importance* to *high importance*. Additionally, there was a negative change in the perceived level of importance of all students have an SAE requirement, with accurate record books and diversity within the students' SAEs from *much importance* to *medium importance*. Lastly, there was a positive change in the perceived level of importance of opportunities for student teacher to judge/monitor district/state CDEs and student participation in advanced awards and degrees on all levels from *medium importance* to *much importance*.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

When placing preservice teachers for the student teaching internship, teacher educators might consider placing a higher emphasis on the cooperating teacher/student teacher relationships. Secondly, teacher educators could provide additional opportunities for preservice teachers to judge or monitor CDEs. Further, when placing preservice teachers for the student teaching internship, teacher educators could choose internship sites with diverse facilities. Finally, we recommend future research could be done to further explore the role of the cooperating teacher and the important aspects of the cooperating teacher/student teacher relationship.

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