

## **Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice: Connecting Courses with Field Experiences**

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The concept of school-university partnerships in pre-service teacher education is not a new idea. School-university partnerships, such as professional development schools, have been discussed in the literature for more than a decade. While popular in concept, partnership efforts such as the professional development schools (PDS) are time consuming to develop and sustain, and they carry with them great professional responsibility (Rice, 2002; Robinson & Darling-Hammond, 1994; The Holmes Group, 1990; Teitel, 1998). Key players in the development of partnerships generally espouse a research agenda that is designed to promote a positive school climate with the intent of improved student outcomes. According

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to the Holmes Group, shared partnership research goals regularly include “improving the quality of K-12 teaching, the preparation of beginning supervising teachers, and the professional development of practicing supervising teachers” (Ross, Brownell, Sindelar, 1999, p. 1). However, accomplishing all components of the established goals is often a difficult task. The Holmes Group notes that many partnerships have yet to attain the benefits inherent in such joint efforts.

Ross, Brownell, and Sindelar (1999) suggest that to

### *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice*

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accomplish the PDS agenda, schools and universities must critically examine the core assumptions that guide how they do their work. Both schools and universities must be open to new ideas regarding their goals and operating structures, and they must be open to the possibility of redefining existing roles. Such critical examination can be quite uncomfortable for participants. The prospect of collecting data that reveal shortcomings as well as progress can be unsettling.

To a large extent, the PDS movement has not resulted in data collection efforts that evaluate specific partnership goals and objectives (Klingner, Ahwee, van Garderen, & Hernandez, 2002; Rice, 2002; Ross, Brownell, & Sindelar, 1999; Kersh & Masztal, 1998; Teitel, 2001). Yet increasingly, state legislators and others are requesting data to support the claims that partnership efforts result in enhanced teacher preparation and K-16 student outcomes (Abdal-Haqq, 1996; Blackwell, 2002). While we as teacher educators value the role school-university partnerships play in teacher preparation, it is incumbent upon us to document how such partnerships actually result in positive outcomes for both schools and universities. For example, to what extent does having teacher candidates work collaboratively with teachers result in increase K-12 student outcomes?

A long-standing goal for many teacher preparation programs is to link theory to practice (i.e., *linkages*) for teacher candidates through close university-school partnerships (Barksdale-Ladd & Rose, 1997). Essentially, the PDS models were established to bridge this gap of theory and practice and to provide an environment in which collaboration between university faculty and teachers can foster shared knowledge, professional growth, and progressive methods of instruction (Holmes Group, 1990; Goodlad, 1990). A primary goal of the PDS model is to engage the teacher candidate in professional activities within schools in order to develop the skills of inquiry, reflection, problem solving and collaboration (Rock & Levin, 2002, p. 7).

According to Merrill (2002), learning is promoted when knowledge is applied and integrated in the real world. "Most instructional design theories advocate application of knowledge and skill as a necessary condition for effective learning (p. 6)." Learning is enhanced when teacher candidates are provided with multiple opportunities to apply what they have learned in meaningful contexts (Gagne, 1985; Gardner, 1999; Perkins & Unger, 1999). A model where teacher candidates both take their courses and complete their practica experience in an actual school setting ("site-based") is one approach that can provide this experience. Barksdale-Ladd et al. (1997) described the "site-based experience" as being instrumental in developing an understanding of the day-to-day life of schools and in providing a medium for increased linkage between course content and practice. The site-based experience provides teacher candidates with more opportunities to successfully apply what they are learning within the context of the classroom (Hillman, Bottomley, Raisner, & Malin, 2000). This type of instruction requires university faculty to collaborate with one another and to purposefully integrate course content and experiences within the practicum setting as well as across relevant courses. By doing this, teacher educators

become models of interdisciplinary instruction in action (Hillman et al., 2000). It provides us the opportunity to practice what we preach.

### **Description of Existing Partnerships**

The Department of Special Education at the authors' university has been involved in formal partnership development with surrounding school districts for the past 12 years (Epanchin, Paul, & Smith, 1996). During that time, the innate difficulties involved in both developing and sustaining partnerships, as well as the difficulties associated with systematically collecting data to evaluate progress toward specified goals, were evident.

The driving force behind the development of an enhanced course-practica delivery model involved challenges that included the growing paucity of certified supervising teachers, multiple placement settings that differed in quality, and difficulty in sustaining systematic data collection. Four primary factors afforded the department the opportunity to implement this model by moving three university courses and an entire cohort of students to an inner-city elementary school: (1) Declining enrollment in the college of education meant that it was manageable to place all of the students at one school, (2) The school administration, faculty and site-coordinator were eager to work with the entire cohort, (3) The university faculty were experienced in school-based teaching, and (4) The Department of Special Education had a focus on urban education. The partner elementary school is a diverse urban school with a large special education student population (approximately 25%), due in large part to the housing of several special programs on site.

This partnership has two specific goals: (1) to develop a partnership where more meaningful linkages can be made by students between the content they learn in their courses and their early practicum field experiences; and (2) to systematically collect data for the purpose of evaluating goal number one. The primary research question that guided data collection during the first semester of the partnership was: To what extent do teacher candidates make linkages between courses taught on-site and their practicum? This paper describes the enhanced partnership model, data collected to answer the research question, findings, and lessons learned.

### **Description of Enhanced Partnership Model**

The current partnership emerged due to common interests between the school and the university. The university was interested in bridging the gap between theory and practice, in other words increasing linkages, and the school was interested in gaining a critical mass of future teachers and developing a reciprocal relationship from which both partners would profit. Mutual needs centered on behavior management (the focus of our level two practicum and an area of need expressed by the school) and the professional development opportunities that could occur for the university students, university faculty, and the school faculty.

### *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice*

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In the traditional model, there was no faculty representation on-site. Field practica and course delivery took place in isolation. Teacher candidates were positioned in various schools, resulting in some disparity in the quality and intensity of the field experience. Supervision of teacher candidates was facilitated by a site-coordinator, a teacher leader who helped coordinate placements and served as a liaison between the school and the university. While there was an attempt to integrate students' experiences through class discussions, faculty found it difficult to connect students' experiences to specific course content (i.e., linkages). Various factors contributed to this including: (1) students were placed in different types of settings; (2) there often was not a match between the practices applied in the practicum setting and the practices being emphasized in classes; (3) students found it difficult to self-advocate for experiences that would better connect to their courses; and (4) faculty had difficulty facilitating connections because they did not have first-hand exposure to their students' practica sites. These factors often led to a disconnect or gap between what students were seeing and what they were learning in their courses.

Given this reality and the importance placed on collaboration in PDSs, the department and school decided to develop a steering committee to explore how this partnership could reduce the disconnect between the university and the school and instead address mutual needs (Levine, 1997; NCATE, 2001). The steering committee was composed of school administration and teachers, and university administration (department chair) and faculty. Teachers who were interested in serving as supervising teachers met with department faculty and discussed how to best organize the practicum experience. This structure allowed both partners to gain an understanding of each other and how their respective experiences in areas of expertise could enrich both the teacher candidates and the school. For example, several general education teachers expressed the need for support in working with several children who were experiencing behavioral difficulties in their early grade classrooms. This led to the development of a project where teacher candidates and teachers collaboratively designed and implemented a behavioral intervention plan to meet the needs of those students.

For the new model, the course instructors committed to developing strong collaborative relationships and ongoing communication among each other and school faculty to ensure that linkages among courses and between courses and field experiences were clearly evident. Faculty agreed to teach three of the students' required courses on site, and committed to spending additional time on site to facilitate students' applied experiences. This was an especially exciting experience for the foundations faculty member since foundations faculty at this university are, for the most part, disconnected from teacher preparation programs in terms of student development in the field.

Three courses were taught at the school site: two special education courses (Behavior Management and Perspectives in LD and E/BD) and one foundations

course (*Learning and the Developing Child*). The course instructors (two tenure-earning faculty and an advanced doctoral student) met several times to discuss how the content, experiences, and assignments in their respective courses could be best organized to maximize students' creation of both linkages between each course and the practica and linkages among the three courses. The course instructors also discussed how course-based assignments could be applied to the practicum school setting. Just outside the door of the classroom was an actual school context for the application of course content, so the challenge was to include as many course learning experiences outside of the classroom as possible. For example, instead of watching a videotape of classroom management practices, the students observed two kindergarten and fifth grade teachers' practices and returned to class to discuss critically the practices they observed. Observations made of teacher-child interactions during breaks could go back into the college classroom for concrete discussion. Students learned about characteristics of Piaget's preoperational and operational stages of development in the first part of class and then were able to transition to a pre-K classroom, where they interacted with children to assess their level of development and to experience what these stages of development looked and sounded like. After the experience, the course instructor and students returned to their own classroom to debrief what they observed and learned, providing an opportunity to make course-to-practicum connections immediately. Thus, in this new model teachable moments could be seized. The close proximity of the college courses to real classrooms allowed teacher candidates to move from theory to practice in real-time rather than abstractly, as is usually the case with traditional courses.

To enhance linkages among the courses, course instructors identified the major topics/concepts for each course and examined them for common themes. This process allowed course instructors to explicitly make connections from one course to another when these themes/topics were being discussed. In this way course instructors were directly able to relate a concept addressed in one course (e.g., the definition of positive reinforcement introduced in the foundations course) to its application in another course (techniques for delivering positive reinforcement presented in the behavior management course). The fact that each course instructor knew what class activities the others were planning made such inter-course connections more likely. Course syllabi and applied assignments were then shared with the supervising teachers and school administrator for feedback.

Teacher candidates were assigned to one or more practicum placements (i.e., teacher and classroom setting). Monday through Wednesday they attended one of the college courses for part of the day and participated in their practicum settings for the other part of the day. One tenure-earning faculty member served as the overall practicum coordinator and was on the school campus approximately one and one-half to two days per week. The two other university supervisors were at the school site approximately one to one and one-half days per week.

Supervising teachers' responsibilities included assisting in the growth and

### *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice*

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development of teacher candidates by modeling effective instruction, by providing opportunities for practice, and by evaluating teacher candidate performance across multiple domains. Evaluations took place twice during the semester, once at mid-term and again at the end of the semester. Supervising teachers attended an orientation meeting where materials were provided and where practicum logistics and expectations for teacher candidates were described. Additionally, supervising teachers received descriptions of course assignments that teacher candidates would complete in the practicum setting. University supervisors were available to meet with supervising teachers as needed on an individual basis.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The 19 participants (16 females and 3 males) were all second-semester juniors. Of the 19 students, 15 were part of a cohort that had been together the previous semester, when they began course work for their major in special education. The remaining four teacher candidates were out of sync with their original cohort and were participating only in one or two of the semester's three courses. However, all of the students participated in the practicum. Only four of the teacher candidates could be considered non-traditional students (i.e., they were over 23 years of age). Participants were registered for no fewer than 15 credit hours and no more than 21 credit hours.

### ***Procedure***

A primary goal of data collection was to ascertain the extent to which teacher candidates were able to make linkages between their courses and practicum experiences. This project was a pilot study for the purpose of informing the program about the efficacy of the enhanced model. Initial design included group interviews at three points (beginning, middle, and end) across the semester. Group interview questions were developed to engage students in discussions regarding their experiences with the model. In order to encourage dialogue during the group interviews, the cohort was subdivided into two smaller groups. Students were randomly assigned to each group. Individuals who were not connected with the course, the practicum, or the teacher candidates in any supervisory capacity facilitated all of the group interviews. The group interviews were conducted at a separate location from the practicum site.

After analyzing the responses from the group interviews conducted at the beginning and middle of the semester (see Appendix A for group interview questions), the researchers recognized the necessity of allowing all individuals to voice their perspectives. The group interview dynamics might have prevented some individuals from participating actively and might not have revealed how prevalent each issue really was across individuals. Therefore, it was decided that the most beneficial data-collection approach to use at the end of semester would be

individual questionnaires based on the data collected via the first two group interviews.

*Individual questionnaire development and administration.* The individual questionnaire was developed in several phases. Drawing from those themes that emerged from the first two group interviews (themes are described in Analysis section), one of the researchers developed initial questions that corresponded to each theme. The other researchers then reviewed these questions. The questionnaire was revised based on input and consensus from all research team members.

During the last week of the semester, the questionnaires were distributed to the teacher candidates. Administering the questionnaire during class time facilitated a 100% return rate. However, all three professors left the room, and questionnaires were collected by a student and were placed in an envelope. The format of the questionnaire consisted of 10 rated responses on an ordinal scale (i.e., 1-5). Groups of items had different response alternatives; that is, possible response choices to items differed. For example, one question was, "Overall, my practicum experience was . . ." The response choices were, "5-very valuable, 4-valuable, 3-somewhat valuable, 2-minimally valuable, 1-not valuable." Another question was, "Overall, the number circled below describes the link between the information and assignments in the three courses taught in conjunction with your practicum . . ." The response choices were, "5-a very strong link between courses, 4-a strong link between courses, 3-a noticeable link between courses, 2-a minimal link between courses, 1-no link between courses." Respondents were given an opportunity to provide clarifying comments for each of the questions. Three additional open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire asked teacher candidates to comment on positive aspects of the model, areas of concern, and other aspects of the model not addressed by any other question.

### **Analysis**

*Group interviews.* At the conclusion of each group interview, typed transcripts of student comments were distributed by the group interview facilitators to each course instructor. Analysis involved several iterations. An initial reading allowed researchers to become familiar with and to gain a sense of the teacher candidates' responses. Although transcripts were analyzed specifically to address the research question regarding linkages, transcripts were analyzed holistically to allow other themes, if evident, to emerge. Along with linkages, two additional themes emerged: empowerment and logistics. Categories were consistent across course instructors. Discrepancies were discussed, and once consensus was reached, categories were further defined. Each researcher then conducted a second reading of the transcripts identifying and coding quotations based on the determined category or theme. Individual findings were then compared in order to ensure trustworthiness of the data. An independent rater coded each of the transcripts using the determined themes. Results from the independent rater were again compared with the results

### *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice*

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from the research team in order to ensure trustworthiness of the data. Coding was consistent across the three primary themes linkage, empowerment and logistics (see Appendix B).

*Questionnaire.* As previously noted, the questionnaire consisted of ordinal scale items that reflected themes generated from the group interview analysis. For each ordinal scale item, teacher candidates were also provided the opportunity to elaborate on the topic. A space was provided below each item where students could write additional comments related to that item. In addition, several open-ended questions were included, allowing teacher candidates to comment on their experiences freely.

Responses to ordinal scale items were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Comments related to each ordinal scale item were not coded unless they addressed a theme other than the theme addressed in that item. The open-ended responses were coded in the same manner as the group interviews. The potential bias of over-representing a theme was avoided through this process (i.e., only free responses that did not result from a theme-based prompt were coded).

## **Results**

Results will be discussed in three sections: (1) teacher candidate perspectives of linkages as reported at the end of the semester, (2) how linkage-making developed across the semester, and (3) factors that emerged that appeared to impact students' ability to make linkages. For the purposes of this paper only data reflecting linkage-making and potential factors that either enhanced or detracted from linkage-making (i.e., empowerment and logistics) were used.

### ***Teacher Candidate Perspectives of Linkages Reported at the End of the Semester***

Based on teacher candidate responses at the end of the semester, it is apparent that students were able to make meaningful linkages between their course content and field experiences. When responding to questions that asked how strong the linkage was between their courses and practicum, 13% of teacher candidates said there was a very strong linkage, 31% said there was a strong linkage, and 50% said that a noticeable linkage existed. In addition, when teacher candidates were asked to compare the linkage they experienced among content across the three courses, 69% said the linkage among courses was greater with the new model in comparison to previous semesters.

Two questions asked teacher candidates to evaluate the extent to which they observed specific instructional practices in their practicum setting that were discussed in their courses. Teacher candidates specifically were asked if their supervising teachers were modeling the practices that were being discussed in their courses. Fifty-six percent of the teacher candidates thought the behavior manage-



ment practices they witnessed were very reflective of or reflective of what they were learning in their classes. Forty-four percent of the teacher candidates believed the academic instructional practices they witnessed were very reflective or reflective.

When asked whether they were able to make more linkages with this model compared to their previous practicum experience, nearly 70% of teacher candidates responded that they were able to make more linkages. No teacher candidate responded that they made fewer linkages. When analyzing all free response comments made by students, researchers found that 40% of all comments concerned linkages (e.g., . . . *I saw and experienced most everything we learned. This model helps us to relate what we are learning directly to the classroom. It was neat to have the professors here with us to help us and to understand exactly what we were experiencing and seeing. Being here really helped in establishing a link between what is learned and how I practice it*). Given these data, we were able to conclude that the new model provided teacher candidates a context in which they were able to make substantial linkages between courses and practicum. Moreover, responses from students indicate that they made more linkages in the new model compared to the previous semester.

#### **Development of Linkage-Making across the Semester**

By capturing teacher candidate perspectives regarding linkages made at three different points across the semester, a developmental picture materialized. How teacher candidates made meaning of their experiences and related it to their coursework seemed to change in nature as the semester progressed. At the beginning of the semester, teacher candidates' comments involving linkage centered on their expectation that the model would provide them an avenue for connecting course and practicum experiences. In some instances, they predicted how this would occur (e.g., *We discuss something and we can go to the classroom and observe*). In other instances, they related how such connections did or did not occur for them in their previous semester (e.g., *She [site coordinator] was real helpful with our data collection . . . Not on the [university] side; I mean our assignments were reasonable and useful, but they were not reading the syllabus at the site. They weren't prepared for us*). A few comments indicated how they believed their upcoming experience would prepare them for the realities of teaching (e.g., . . . *will find out right away if they want to be a teacher. . . . due to the reality. . . . We'll find out what kinds of kids we want to work with . . .*). At this point, teacher candidates seemed to appreciate the potential of the new model for making linkages. However, most of their comments refer to the role others would play (or have played) in making linkages occur. Their comments did not indicate that they considered the active role they would need to take in making linkages occur. It is as if they perceived the process of linkage occurring automatically, determined by external factors such as the site they were in and the degree to which others made it possible.

At the middle of the semester, teacher candidates expressed that they were not

### *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice*

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making linkages. Teacher candidates made few comments regarding the linkages they were making and those comments that were made mostly were critiques (e.g., *They [the instructors who were teaching at the school] think this is our whole life. . . They need to correlate with all the professors [courses that are not part of the partnership]. . . so the information would flow a lot better. . . . We should make a discussion of 'What I am doing with my child?', then we could all learn from each other. . . .*). At this point in the term, it appears teacher candidates were primarily concerned with how program demands were impacting them, from the workload to a perceived lack of cohesion across all courses they were taking that semester (courses inside and outside of the partnership pilot project). Comments did not include references to any direct course-practicum linkages (e.g., seeing a particular instructional practice used by their supervising teacher that they learned about in class).

At the end of the semester, a dramatic change occurred in how teacher candidates characterized their linkage experience. Linkage was the theme around which teacher candidates made the most free response comments. These comments not only were many in number (i.e., 40% of all comments made), but they reflected a qualitative change as well. As already mentioned, the few comments made during the middle of the term related to critiques of how courses could better facilitate linkages for them. Contrary to this, comments at the end of the term conveyed teacher candidates' ability to compare what they were learning in their classes to what they were seeing and experiencing in their practicum setting (e.g., *Good experiences implementing my behavior management plan. . . . I saw some real behavior management examples in the classroom. . . . Glimpse into real school issues such as conflicts with staff and administration, over-representation, testing bias, etc.*). It appears that teacher candidates were able to transition from focusing on "what was wrong" to "what they learned," perhaps realizing the expectations that they had expressed at the beginning of the semester for making linkages.

#### **Factors that Impacted Linkage-Making**

Several related findings help elucidate the changing nature with which teacher candidates experienced linkages. Two additional themes emerged during data analyses that highlight issues important to this group of teacher candidates: empowerment and logistics. These two themes provide insight into issues that might have impacted linkage-making by teacher candidates.

Empowerment was the second most prevalent theme and refers to feelings of having or not having autonomy, voice or control. Teacher candidates expressed overwhelming concerns about a lack of empowerment during the middle of the semester. Several issues emerged. One issue involved their acclimation to a structured school schedule (e.g., *No freedom. They are strict about what you can do at certain times. . . .*). A second issue was their perception of not being listened to by university faculty (e.g., *Need to take into consideration our comments if they*

want to do it again so it will be better for the next group. . . . I don't like how they ask us what our concerns are and they don't change things.). A third issue was teacher candidates' perception that they were not being accepted by the school and teachers (e.g., *Teachers are not being very professional and say things about us. . . . they say they are stuck with us.*). Finally, they expressed feelings of being controlled by university faculty (e.g., *What they say is what we have to live with. . . . We are treated like we are elementary school. . . . It should be up to our supervising teachers to evaluate our performance . . .*). When given the opportunity to articulate their empowerment concerns and possible ways to resolve them during a mid-semester group meeting, the teacher candidates were unable to do so. Instead, their concerns seemed to revolve around issues such as drive time, not being on the university campus enough, the environmental conditions of the school and classroom they had their university classes in, having to be in class more than three hours for a three credit course, and interpersonal issues among the cohort. Interestingly, while empowerment concerns increased at mid-semester, the expression of making linkages decreased significantly. However, at the end of the semester, the opposite was true. End-of-semester comments rarely concerned empowerment. In fact, of the six comments made, five indicated feelings of increased empowerment.

Logistics refers to anything related to the structure of the new program (e.g., scheduling, organization, placements, etc.). Concerns regarding logistics were most prevalent at mid-semester. Over one third of the comments by both groups were related to logistics, and concerns centered on how their schedules and practicum procedures impeded their ability to make linkages (e.g., *A lot of us are nontraditional students; we drive over one hour each way and we can't stay late or come early. . . . Last semester I was five minutes from my house.*). While logistics continued to be an important issue for students at the end of the semester, the nature of the comments was much different. Instead of describing how logical concerns impeded linkage-making, teacher candidates provided suggestions for how scheduling and practicum procedures could be changed to enhance linkage-making (e.g., *Being in a regular ed classroom, I did not make a lot of association. . . . Don't place interns with substitutes. . . . [Schedule] full days in the classroom . . . afternoon placement is not insightful because of recess and lunch period.*). There also were positive comments related to logistics and the potential of the model (e.g., *Great idea, need to work out the kinks, make some changes.*). The qualitative change of the comments related to logistics revealed a developmental change in this group of teacher candidates. By the end of the term, they made sense of and valued their experience rather than focusing primarily on what they did not like. Their comments seem to be much less personalized, indicating they were able to more objectively reflect about their experience in a constructive manner.

Combined, the change in the nature and intensity of comments related to empowerment and logistics across the semester suggest to us that this group of teacher candidates began to transform professionally, from student to novice

### *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice*

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reflective practitioner. Perhaps, the degree to which teacher candidates can make sense of their experiences, and therefore make linkages between courses and field experiences, is dependent on such transformation. Conversely, perhaps by structuring early course and practica experiences in ways that create a greater nexus between them provides beginning level preservice teacher candidates a context for beginning this transformation.

### **Conclusion/Future Directions**

Results from this pilot study indicate that teacher candidates were able to make concrete linkages between their course work and their field practicum experience. The majority of teacher candidates (94%) responded that noticeable linkages existed between courses and practica. Nearly 70% of teacher candidates reported they experienced greater linkages than in past semesters. Furthermore, at the end of the semester 40% of all free response comments were related to course-practic linkages. Findings also point to the need for additional data collection that identifies specific components of the enhanced model that strengthen linkage making. The close collaboration among the course instructors provided a learning environment that allowed for a smooth transition for students as they moved from the university classroom to an experiential environment in which they applied their learning. The fact that these opportunities were deliberately planned supported the generalization of the skills and knowledge by teacher candidates. Having university classes on-site allowed for “teachable moments.” These teachable moments occurred during times that typically would be considered “down time” (i.e., breaks) in the traditional course format. Learning occurred during all times and in many different places at the practicum site, ensuring that the context for learning was broadened.

A great deal has been learned from this experience. First and foremost, an informed perspective of the outcome of this partnership effort and new course-practicum delivery model was gained. Although collecting data and implementing a new partnership model simultaneously was challenging, doing so has helped to answer a key question important to the partnership effort. First, it showed the potential this model has for helping teacher candidates to make linkages between their courses and their practicum experiences. Moreover, despite the challenges some teacher candidates experienced, they believed the model allowed them to make more linkages when compared to their previous semester. From a faculty standpoint, participating in such a model provided a much clearer understanding of what content students were, and were not, applying from the classes they completed. The excitement in watching this happen, and recognizing how, helped faculty make more informed instructional decisions.

Even more captivating was getting a glimpse of how teacher candidates developmentally experienced linkage making. Collecting data on how their experiences evolved across the semester provided valuable information about what

factors seem to impact teacher candidates as they made linkages. First, it has provided a framework for anticipating how teacher candidates experience the new model, thereby helping them make better decisions for future semesters. Second, being able to step back and to visualize how teacher candidate experiences evolved over time helped faculty anticipate how teacher candidates' behaviors should be interpreted during future semesters. In the midst of the semester, instructors had a difficult time interpreting the strong empowerment-related concerns. Perhaps this is a natural occurrence. Perhaps teacher candidates need time to wrestle with professional expectations early in their programs, before they can begin to appreciate such expectations as structure for professional and personal growth. It is as if the teacher candidates had conflicting desires. On one hand they wanted to be college students; and on the other hand, they wanted to be teachers... right now. This created a conflict in that gaining the latter meant giving up some of the former.

From the qualitative change of teacher candidates' comments across the course of the semester, it is evident that the teacher candidates made the transition from college student to professional. They made great strides in their ability to move from a passive to a more active role in making objective connections, appreciating positive aspects of their experience, and making constructive suggestions for the future. They moved from personalizing the experience in a negative way, where they focused on external factors they perceived as barriers to their professional development, to taking ownership for their experience, thereby making their experience a much more valuable one. This was encouraging to see.

These results raise an interesting question. In early practicum experiences, is it more important for students to observe teachers implementing instructional and behavioral practices they are learning about in their courses, or is it more important to provide a highly structured process for them to apply the course content-related practices themselves? The data collected suggest that teacher candidates may benefit more from practica that emphasize structured experiences where they are able to apply course content. Findings also suggest that effective professional development experiences can be created that ameliorate field placement issues resulting from teacher shortages, a lack of certified special education teachers to serve as supervising teachers, and inconsistent best-practice models. This is encouraging because it empowers teacher educators to be proactive and to design professional development instruction and experiences that are relevant, meaningful, and appropriate for beginning pre-service teacher candidates.

Certainly, there were limitations to this study. First, group interviews were used at the beginning and middle of the semester to evaluate teacher candidate experiences and questionnaires were used at the end. This prevented data interpretation in absolute terms. Although the rationale for taking this approach was logical, it nonetheless was a limitation. Second, data were collected with one cohort at one point in time in their professional preparation across one semester, thereby limiting potential generalization of the findings. Third, there is no way to ascertain whether

### *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice*

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student responses were biased with respect to their thinking that they should respond based upon what they believed the questions wanted them to say. An attempt to control for this situation involved the coding of only free responses thereby reducing the chance that such bias occurred. Fourth, member checks were not incorporated into the data analysis. While inter-rater reliability was achieved through an independent coder, member checks would have added another level of triangulation of the data. Fifth, the degree of match between course content and the practicum experience is a variable that could also limit the generalization of these findings. The degree to which teacher candidate perceptions are influenced by the type of content they are learning and the extent to which that content is more or less evident in real classrooms is something to consider for future data collection. Despite the fact that the instructional and behavioral practices they were learning about were not overwhelmingly evident in their practicum settings, this group of teacher candidates none-the-less were able to make course-practicum linkages. A possible explanation for this is the experiences they were provided through several applied assignments completed within the practicum setting. Furthermore, the practicum setting was right outside the university classroom door, allowing for, at times, immediate implementation, and observation and debriefing opportunities. These assignments were highly structured and required students to apply several of the instructional and behavioral practices they learned in their courses within their practicum setting. Without such experiences, the degree to which teacher candidates were able to make meaningful course-practicum linkages might have been less apparent.

Despite the limitations of the study, the findings have importance both for the program and the larger teacher preparation community, particularly as they relate to university-school partnerships. In terms of the program, the data collected have helped the researchers evaluate this pilot partnership effort. It provides a framework for how the delivery of early course and practicum experiences can be enhanced. This pilot project has also helped the researchers gain greater insight into how early preservice teacher candidates develop professionally and what factors may be important for this development to occur. For the greater teacher preparation community, this experience shows that it is worthwhile to ask relevant partnership questions, design a process for answering those questions through data collection, and use data to enhance and or to change the nature of the partnership. A multi-lens approach to data collection and analysis helped us gain a deeper understanding of issues related to the research question. As others journey into site-based course-practicum delivery, perhaps this successful experience will encourage others to do the same.

This partnership continues and several changes and enhancements have been made based on the data that were gathered. Teacher candidates' experiences as well as those of supervising teachers are continuously being evaluated. Several examples of the changes that were made are listed below. The relevant theme addressed by each change is listed afterwards in parentheses.

The university and school partners:

1. Changed the schedule of classes so that teacher candidates take classes on Mondays and participate in their practicum two full days (logistics).

2. Arranged class time so supervising teachers have the opportunity to attend specific portions of the Behavior Management class that relate to topics critical to the behavior-change assignment. Supervising teachers also receive in-service points for their participation in class (linkage).

3. Enhanced orientation for the upcoming cohort by notifying them earlier about how their second semester will differ from their first and having a teacher candidate who participated in the initial experience discuss her experiences and answer questions. The principal and a teacher also come to introduce themselves and to welcome the teacher candidates to their school (logistics and empowerment).

4. Restructured how university supervisors complete observations of teacher candidates. Four observations are now scheduled. A professional development emphasis is placed on these observations rather than an evaluation emphasis. The first observation includes both the teacher candidate and the university supervisor observing the classroom setting together. Then they meet to discuss what they saw, and the teacher candidate introduces the classroom to the university supervisor (empowerment, linkage, and logistics).

5. At the beginning of the semester, provided a schedule that described which assignment-related activities should be accomplished during each week of the practicum for each course is provided to both teacher candidates and supervising teachers (linkage and empowerment).

6. Collected data to assess the academic and behavioral progress of the elementary students that teacher candidates teach. There are two purposes for this data collection effort: (1) to determine whether the partnership efforts are positively impacting the partner school's student achievement, and (2) to provide the teacher candidates with a process for visualizing the difference they can make in students' lives (empowerment and linkage).

These continual data collection efforts will help to continue to validate the effectiveness of the partnership and to reach the goals the school and university have established for the partnership. More importantly they will allow all of those who are involved - teacher candidates, teachers at the school, school administrators, university faculty, and the elementary school students - to continue on a path of both personal and professional growth.

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### *Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice*

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**Appendix A**

Group Interview Questions

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Beginning of Semester

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1. Why do you think we have structured your learning experiences as we have this semester?
  2. Describe your experiences in relation to how the courses and the practicum were structured last semester.
  3. What are some of the disconnects between course-work and practicum you experienced last semester?
  4. What were some of the pros and cons of your experiences last semester as a whole?
  5. What do you think will be the pros and cons of your experiences this semester as it is structured?
  6. Does this initiative facilitate your learning experiences? How or how not?
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Middle of Semester

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1. How are things going so far this semester?
  2. What are some experiences you have had that stand out in your mind?
  3. Describe the extent to which you are seeing/experiencing meaningful connections between your practicum and the topics being covered in your courses.
  4. What are the positive aspects of the model?
  5. What are some changes you would recommend for this model?
  6. Think about your experiences last term. How do they compare to this semester so far?
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**Appendix B**

Definitions of Each Theme Represented in the Students' and Supervising Teachers' Group Interviews and Clarifying Comments

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Theme/Coding	Definition
Linkage	comments that indicate a direct connection made between course related material, topics, or experiences and one or more practicum experiences
Empowerment	comments that indicate feelings of having or not having autonomy, voice, or control within the context of their practicum experience including uneasiness with increased supervision and observation from university faculty
Logistics	comments that refer to scheduling, organization, placements, and other aspects of the courses or practicum that entail planning or decision-making. Also includes comments dealing with peer or university faculty "support" since such support would not have existed had the semester experience not been organized as it was