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Perspectives of Early Childhood Degree Students, Mentors, and Faculty on Quality Field Experiences

Carmen Cook
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Carmen Cook

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Walden University

2026

Abstract

Perspectives of Early Childhood Degree Students, Mentors, and Faculty on Quality Field

Experiences

by

Carmen Cook

MA, Concordia University, 2002

BA, Saint Cloud State University, 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

February 2026

Abstract

There is a need for high-quality practice-based field experiences as a component of early childhood teacher preparation programs. This need had been deemed critical and was prioritized by both national and local organizations in a Midwest state. Little research had focused on the quality of field experiences. Guided by Dewey's progressive education and Vygotsky's social cultural theory, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of students, mentor teachers, and faculty on what constitutes high-quality field experiences and what components of the field experience are most important. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 16 early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and faculty from college and university programs in the study state. Thematic analysis was conducted using a priori and open coding. Five themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) communication, clear and common expectations, and roles outside the triad; (b) mentor and faculty engagement; (c) student growth, motivation, and individualized support; (d) practicum site quality and environmental factors; and (e) challenges and barriers to high-quality experiences. The results of this study lend insight into what is important for the creation of quality within the field experience from the perspectives of those who are directly involved. This study may contribute to positive social change by providing guidance for improving the quality of practice-based experiences, influencing change within those experiences, and increasing the preparation of the early childhood workforce.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my husband and children who believed I could accomplish this goal. I am so grateful to each of you for the light you bring to my days. I am happiest when we are all together and love you each so much. Thank you for all the hours and days you allowed me to work on this project. I am looking forward to more time with and for each of you.

I also want to dedicate this work to all of the early childhood educators, professionals, and faculty in our state. The field of early childhood needs your continued advocacy, care and determination to move forward. Just as this project took one step at a time, I encourage all of you to continue to stay the course. Together we continue to strive for high quality early care and education.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	2
Problem Statement.....	4
Purpose of the Study	6
Research Questions.....	7
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Nature of the Study	9
Definitions.....	11
Assumptions.....	12
Scope and Delimitations	13
Limitations	14
Significance.....	15
Summary.....	16
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	18
Literature Search Strategy.....	20
Theoretical Foundation	22
Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts	24
Preparing the Early Childhood Workforce	24
Field Experience Standards.....	27
Practice-Based Experience Learning Models	30

Online Field Experiences in a Pandemic	38
Research Related to the Field Experience Triad.....	41
Research Related to Individuals Within the Triad.....	47
Summary.....	53
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	55
Research Design and Rationale	56
Role of the Researcher	58
Methodology.....	60
Participant Selection	60
Instrumentation	63
Data Analysis	65
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	67
Credibility (Internal Validity).....	68
Transferability (External Validity)	69
Dependability	69
Confirmability.....	70
Ethical Procedures	70
Summary.....	72
Chapter 4: Results.....	73
Setting.....	73
Data Collection	76
Data Analysis	77

Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	82
Credibility (Internal Validity).....	82
Transferability (External Validity)	83
Dependability	83
Confirmability.....	84
Results.....	84
Theme 1: Communication, Clear and Common Expectations and Roles	
Outside the Triad.....	85
Theme 2: Mentor and Faculty Engagement.....	93
Theme 3: Student Growth, Motivation, and Individualized Support.....	103
Theme 4: Practicum Site Quality and Environmental Factors.....	115
Theme 5: Challenges and Barriers to High-Quality Experiences.....	119
Summary	125
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations.....	127
Interpretation of the Findings.....	128
Theory and Connections	128
Theme 1: Communication, Clear and Common Expectations, and Roles	
Outside the Triad.....	130
Theme 2: Mentor and Faculty Engagement.....	132
Theme 3: Student Growth, Motivation, and Individualized Support.....	139
Theme 4: Practicum Site Quality and Environmental Factors.....	145
Theme 5: Challenges and Barriers to High-Quality Experiences.....	148

Limitations	152
Recommendations.....	153
Implications.....	155
Conclusion	157
References.....	159
Appendix A: Interview Protocol Student.....	175
Appendix B: Interview Protocol Mentor Teacher	179
Appendix C: Interview Protocol: Faculty	183
Appendix D: Student Demographic and Background Information	187
Appendix E: Mentor Demographic and Background Information	189
Appendix F: Faculty Demographic and Background Information	191

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographics.....	75
Table 2. Examples of Open Codes.....	77
Table 3. Examples of Categories and Open Codes.....	80
Table 4. Themes and Axial Codes or Categories.....	81

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The focus of this study was to explore high-quality, practice-based experiences in early childhood preparation programs. Experts have prioritized quality field experiences as critical in the preparation of early childhood degree students for the workforce (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2022; Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018; Hewitt & Harney, 2019; Moses & Harrill, 2022; National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2020b). However, limited literature was available in the past 5 to 10 years regarding the field experience (Matengu et al., 2021; Pihanpera et al., 2022) and there was no literature addressing the quality of the experience in early childhood preparation programs.

To increase the potential for creating quality field experiences, a theoretical lens grounded in the works of Dewey and Vygotsky was utilized to conduct a basic qualitative study that explored the perspectives of early childhood degree students, faculty, and mentor teachers on high-quality field experiences and what was most important to creating positive, quality experiences. This study was conducted through semistructured interviews with five college/university triads in the research state who had participated in field experiences as part of their early childhood preparation program. Thematic analysis was employed upon completion of all interviews. The study findings resulted in data that may inform field-based experiences in the future. Findings may influence potential for positive social change by helping early childhood preparation programs understand the perspectives of the field experiences triads and make changes to increase the quality of practice-based experiences for all involved. In the following sections, I provide

background information on my study and a summary of relevant literature through a discussion of the problem, purpose, research questions, theoretical framework, and nature of the study.

Background

Early childhood preparation students need high-quality placement sites and field experience (Moses & Harrill, 2022; NAEYC, 2021a). Increased access to high-quality field experiences for early childhood preparation students in which they have opportunities to learn, practice, and receive feedback in quality learning environments throughout their early childhood preparation coursework had been identified as a priority in the research state and nationally (Hewitt & Harney, 2019). In a time of great need of new teachers due to a global teaching shortage (UNESCO, 2024), this emphasis on the teacher education practicum is vital. Field experiences have been found to influence student teachers' professional development, attitudes, efficacy, resilience, and commitment to the teaching profession (Heinz, 2024).

Despite prioritization of providing high-quality field experience in the field of early childhood education, a clear gap of literature existed, which made it challenging to provide guidance for improvement. Literature reviews conducted in the past 20 years in the field of early childhood included fewer than 10 studies related to field experience in the past several years (Matengu et al., 2021; Pihanpera et al., 2022). Foundational recommendations on this topic from the Institute of Medicine & National Research Council (2015) and NAEYC (2021a) emphasized that to transform the early childhood workforce, improvements are necessary both in higher education and practice-based

experiences to better prepare early childhood professionals. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE, 2010) called for a complete transformation of teacher education through increased preparation in clinical or field experiences, yet no recent guidance or publication was available.

Practice-based field experiences in bachelor's programs are required in most states and are a key component to early childhood teacher preparation (NAEYC, 2021a). These experiences build connections between knowledge and practice (Burroughs et al., 2020; Lux et al., 2022; Ribaeus et al., 2022; H. Taylor et al., 2021), prepare students for readiness as a professionals (Brown et al., 2017; Dewhurst et al., 2020; J. Kim, 2020; Yoon & Larkin, 2018), and enhance competency (Drewes et al., 2021; Fusaro et al., 2022) and efficacy (Johnson et al., 2017). Field experiences also impact longevity for professionals in the field of education and have been found to boost sustainability in the field and student commitment as early childhood teachers (La Paro, et al., 2018). There are also benefits for young children as preparation students show increased positive dispositions for supporting teacher–child interactions and fostering development and learning (Lippard, 2024). Improving and transforming field experiences has been called for both locally and nationally (CAEP, 2022; Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018; Hewitt & Harney, 2019; Moses & Harrill, 2022; NAEYC, 2020b) for these reasons. My study was needed to address the gap of limited research on the quality of field experiences and to provide a foundational step of exploring the quality of field experiences from the perspectives of the field experience triad.

Problem Statement

The problem I sought to address was the limited focus and continued lack of research on high-quality field experiences for early childhood degree students (Fusaro et al., 2022; La Paro et al., 2018; Matengu et al., 2021; NAEYC, 2020; Pihanpera et al., 2022; Sumrall et al., 2017). Locally and nationally, experts have prioritized quality field experiences as critical in the preparation of early childhood degree students for the workforce (CAEP, 2022; Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018; Hewitt & Harney, 2019; NAEYC, 2020a). The field of early childhood education has continued to take steps toward educational qualifications for professionals. However, employers have concerns about the depth of knowledge and expertise in the field, and have advocated for more professional experience in classrooms to better prepare early childhood teachers as they enter the workforce (Boyd et al., 2020). Hilaski et al. (2021) highlighted the impetus of policymakers, accrediting bodies, and accountability reformists for more practice-based experiences in teacher education. Increased access to and clear guidance for high-quality field experiences for early childhood degree students to learn, develop and practice skills, and receive feedback have also been identified as a priority in the state where I conducted my research (Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018; Hewitt & Harney, 2019). In this state, faculty described challenges in finding and accessing high-quality field placements resulting in ineffective learning for early childhood preparation students and the potential for negative outcomes for children (Hewitt & Harney, 2019).

Research was needed to better comprehend how components of higher education, including practice-based coursework, prepare students to work with young children

(Fusaro et al., 2022). It was also vital to describe the nature and quality of those field experiences (Gallo-Fox & Stegeman, 2020) so that improvements could be made. For my study, field experiences comprised early childhood classroom-based experiences, including practicum hours and student teaching completed during a student's 2- or 4-year degree program.

Limited research was available regarding field experience quality in early childhood during the past several years (Matengu et al., 2021; Pihanpera et al., 2022). Researchers had examined student teachers' perceptions of various aspects of field experience, including their readiness for teaching (Brown et al., 2017), transition to teaching (Garza et al., 2016), self-efficacy (Johnson et al., 2017), and the influence of the mentor teacher (S. Kim et al., 2024, Sumrall et al., 2017). Those participating in the field experience have benefited from a shared understanding of the challenges and tasks at hand within that experience (Burroughs et al., 2020). However, the quality of field experiences from the perspectives of the early childhood degree student, the mentor teacher, and the faculty from the college or university and the components of quality that are most important in creating a positive field experience remained largely unexplored and had been noted as lacking in the literature in the field (Burroughs et al., 2020; Fusaro et al., 2022; Haslip & Gullo, 2018; La Paro et al., 2018).

The clinical practice or field experience triad includes the student teacher, the mentor or cooperating teacher, and the university faculty (Burroughs et al., 2020; Isik-Ercan et al., 2017; Lux et al., 2022). This triad has been influential in the formation of knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teacher candidates. Mentor teachers have played a

significant role in the success and quality of the practice-based experience through their enactment of practices (Lafferty, 2018; Lux et al., 2022), communication, beliefs, and fit with the preservice student (La Paro et al., 2018). Faculty have held the important role of imparting knowledge, theory, and pedagogy in college and university classrooms and supervising field experiences of their students (Burroughs et al.; 2020; Isik-Ercan et al., 2017). To better address quality in field experiences, I explored the perspectives of the early childhood degree students, faculty, and mentor teachers regarding what constitutes a high-quality field experience and what components of the field experience are most important to creating a positive experience. My research contributed to the literature and narrowed the gap related to the quality of field experience by providing data related to high-quality field experiences from the perspectives of the field experience triad.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood degree students, faculty, and mentor teachers on high-quality field experiences and what is most important to creating a positive, quality experience for all those involved. This study was needed to fill the gap in the literature regarding high-quality field experiences for early childhood degree students (La Paro et al., 2018; Matengu et al., 2021; Pihanpera et al., 2022; Sumrall et al., 2017). I chose to focus on the field experience triad (i.e., the student, faculty, and mentor teacher) because they are the key actors in the field experience (Burroughs et al., 2020; Lux et al., 2022) and due to the triad's critical influence on teacher candidates (Isik-Ercan et al., 2017). There has often been a disconnect between quality in field experiences and early childhood teacher

preparation programs (Burroughs et al., 2020). This has been problematic because the field experience is a critical component in preparation where students bridge knowledge to practice (NAEYC, 2021a; Ribaeus et al., 2022; H. Taylor et al., 2021). Understanding and developing consistency in the philosophy among the three key actors (i.e., the triad) has been noted as an important consideration to better understand the quality of field experiences (Sumrall et al., 2017).

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty regarding what constitutes quality field experiences?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty regarding what is most important to creating quality field experiences?

Theoretical Framework

The theories that grounded this study were Dewey's (1938) quality of experience in education and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Numerous researchers cited Vygotsky and/or Dewey in their discussions of learning within early childhood field experiences that are part of teacher preparation (Doran, 2020; Pihanpera et al., 2022; Sarvis & Silvers, 2019; J. N. Stapleton et al., 2021) because learning is constructed through social interactions and active learning. These theories were logically connected to the nature of the current study and are briefly described here and with more depth in Chapter 2. Dewey argued that the quality of experience in education is critical in the

process of learning. Dewey ascertained that quality of the experience has two aspects: “agreeableness or disagreeableness and its influence upon later experiences” (p. 27). In other words, the educator, within any learning environment, needs to arrange for the content, interactions, and environment to satisfy the growth and capacities of the student in conditions that provide worth and meaning to the experience as part of the process of education (Dewey, 1938). This creates quality or is “agreeable” to the learner. Then, the active learner is more likely to process and apply learning through experience, such as within the early childhood preparation students’ field experiences (Pihanpera et al., 2022).

Vygotsky (1978, as cited in L. Stapleton & Stefaniak, 2019) emphasized the construction of knowledge through social interactions, exploration, and experiences that build on prior knowledge. One of Vygotsky’s prime contributions is that interaction contributes to advancing knowledge. When considering the field experience, early childhood preparation students’ education and learning are connected through interactions within the student teaching triad and experiences constructed by both the student and educators (Pihanpera et al., 2022). The student teaching triad has been significant in the formation of knowledge, competency, and dispositions of preservice teachers. This triad has often been viewed as ineffective, and there have been many efforts to restructure rather than strengthen the triad (Isik-Ercan et al., 2017).

Field experiences are complex; they are not a “single, observable reality” that can be measured quantitatively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). Each member of the field experience triad holds their own reality, interpretation, or perspective of this particular

event from how they engaged in the experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To better understand what constitutes high-quality field experiences, I sought to construct meaning through how each member of the triad interpreted the quality of a field experience. The research questions were crafted utilizing Dewey's quality of experience and Vygotsky's lens of social cultural learning for interpretation of the interactions between the perspectives as a means of better understanding the quality of education within the field experience. The perspectives of the triad were explored due to their potential to be a key factor in strengthening the triad and building quality in field experiences for all.

Nature of the Study

In this study, I employed a basic qualitative design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to explore the quality of field experiences through the perspectives of students, mentor teachers, and faculty. This method was selected because researchers can better understand by discussing a situation, such as field experiences, with those who have experienced it (Creswell, 2017). Interview questions were developed by drawing from Dewey's assertions about the importance of the quality of experience in education, Vygotsky's social-cultural theory, and terminology presented in the NAEYC's (2021a) *Higher Education Program Accreditation Standards*, specifically Standard F: Field Experience Quality. Simultaneous data collection and analysis occurred throughout the study, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). The collected data were coded and categorized to identify themes. Shared or opposing perspectives among and between groups regarding the quality of field experiences and what components of the field experience are most important to creating a positive experience were noted. The

methodological approach was derived from Sharon and Libby's text (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and the analysis was informed by the theoretical framework, which included the theories of Vygotsky (1978) and Dewey (1938).

For my planned research design, I recruited participants who were early childhood degree students, faculty, or mentor teachers from various areas across the research state. Participants were recruited and selected from five colleges or universities that offer early childhood degree programs in which graduates had student teaching experience and were being prepared to work with children from birth through age 8. I selected one early childhood student, one mentor teacher, and one faculty member from each college or university program, and each triad had experience with field placements. Early childhood degree students had completed student teaching, graduated from their degree program, and were working in an early childhood classroom prior to the interview. Faculty and mentor teachers had previous experience working with early childhood degree students in a field experience.

Interview protocols (see Appendix A, B, C) with semistructured questions were developed based on the research questions, theoretical framework and NAEYC's (2021a) standard on field experience quality for accreditation of higher education programs. Data were collected from participants in one-on-one interviews that took place by Zoom. The data collected included responses to interview questions intended to elicit the participants' perspectives on high-quality field experiences and what is most important to creating a positive experience. Data were analyzed to uncover and interpret meanings

from participant experiences. Data analysis included finding common or re-occurring patterns or themes that described the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Definitions

Early childhood preparation program: Programs at 2- and 4-year colleges and universities in the research state designed to prepare early childhood professionals for degrees in the early childhood field of study. Early childhood is defined by NAEYC (2021a) as the period of time in development that occurs from birth through the age of 8.

Early childhood preparation student: Students in a 2- or 4-year preparation program organized around professional standards and competencies in the research state seeking candidacy as early childhood professionals. NAEYC (2021a) also referred to students as candidates seeking completion in early childhood professional preparation programs. These students may also be candidates for professional licensure or certification.

Faculty: Full-time, part-time, adjunct or community faculty, instructors, and others who have taught courses (NAEYC, 2021a). This includes individuals with graduate degrees at the 2- or 4-year institutions preparing early childhood candidates according to early childhood professional standards and competencies of the research state and institutions who work directly with field experience students and mentor teachers.

Mentor/cooperating teacher: Teachers of young children in the field who have supervised, facilitated, or mentored field/practicum experiences of early childhood professional candidates. Mentor teachers ensure students have positive examples of early

childhood practice consistent with early childhood standards and provide consistent mentoring and evaluation of students' practice in the field (NAEYC, 2021a).

Practice-based/field experience: Opportunities during an early childhood student's preparation program that can be formal and informal and used to conduct observations, fieldwork, practica student teaching, and other clinical experiences (NAEYC, 2021a). The implementation and sequencing of experiences promotes student development of knowledge, competence, and dispositions necessary for work in the field of early childhood. The terms practice-based experience or field experience will be used interchangeably throughout the study.

Assumptions

I made several assumptions associated with this study. One underlying assumption is that field experiences increased the knowledge and competence of early childhood preparation students through the application of knowledge and theory gained in coursework. I also viewed field experiences as a necessary component of an early childhood preparation program. Another assumption I held was that the perspectives participants shared about their past field experiences in their respective roles, and their responses to interview questions, were honest and thorough. I assumed that participants are representative of the broader population of individuals who hold similar roles in the research state so that the perspectives of general opinion are represented from the state. These assumptions were necessary to consider before interviewing participants and during preliminary analysis in relation to the research questions regarding the quality of

field experiences. I used participant responses during the data analysis process to identify codes, categories and themes.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this research included early childhood preparation students, mentor teachers, and faculty at colleges and universities in a Midwest state who were involved in early childhood field experiences. Finding settings that provide students with exemplars of quality early childhood practice with the support of experienced mentors was noted as problematic (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Doran, 2020). Thus, increasing the quality of field experiences was prioritized in the research state (Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018). I chose early childhood education as the field for this study because there has been limited research focused on field experiences (Matengu et al., 2021; Pihanpera et al., 2022), and no literature that has explored the quality of the field experience from the perspective of students, mentor teachers, and faculty in early childhood education.

My study was delimited to triads from state colleges and universities that had involvement in practice-based experiences prior to the interview. Triads included one early childhood degree student, one faculty, and one mentor teacher from the same institution. Early childhood degree students had completed student teaching, graduated from their degree program, and were working in an early childhood classroom prior to the interview. Faculty and mentor teachers had experience working with early childhood degree students in a field experience. Mentor teachers who participated in this study were those who have mentored preservice teachers in an undergraduate early childhood degree

program in an early childhood field experience. Faculty and mentors who have not been involved with early childhood field experiences were not included due to the lack of understanding and ability to lend perspective. Similarly, students who had not participated in field experiences were not participants. Including perspectives of each member of the triad of five colleges and universities was intentional to provide maximum variation in the study sample to improve transferability so that readers may make comparisons to their contexts or transfer aspects of the study or findings to their situations (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Limitations

A qualitative research design was utilized to understand individuals' perspectives and reflect the meaning they made of their experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). A qualitative approach was selected as it is the best method for learning about a particular phenomenon, field experiences, with the goal of improving future practice (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, I sought to develop insights to improve the quality of practice-based experiences in the research state. Some limitations to this study exist. The study was limited to a small sample size in the research state. I made efforts to include interviews from colleges and universities throughout the research state; however, the data gathered may not reflect views in other locations. For instance, urban and rural practice-based experiences may have differences in perceptions of quality. Zoom interviews became more common place and were a preferable meeting method to eliminate travel time and concerns regarding in-person interviews. However, zoom interviews had limitations in that a benefit of interviews is that they are relational and should be built on

mutual engagement and reciprocal transformation, which can be more difficult to create through technology (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). My involvement and position in the field of early childhood has provided me with knowledge and background related to field experiences. This means my knowledge and experience as a student, mentor teacher, and faculty member presented innate biases and subjectivities as I approached my study. I identified sources of potential influence and contribution to my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) which are outlined in more depth in Chapter 3. To combat biases, I followed the interview protocol and asked open-ended questions and follow-up prompts. I engaged in dialogue with colleagues involved in research from both early childhood and other disciplines to keep bias in check throughout research and data analysis. The first interview transcripts were submitted to my committee chair, to ensure the interview protocol was followed prior to conducting other interviews. An expert reviewer was utilized to check for bias and conducted a review of my findings.

Significance

This study has potential significance for contributing to the literature and filling the gap related to the quality of field experiences. Results could provide guidance, better understanding, and definition of what constitutes high-quality field experiences, and identifying what components are important to creating high-quality field experiences for early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty. This knowledge and understanding may contribute to increasing the quality of future field experiences. The results of my study could provide a significant contribution to the field of early childhood education and positive social change in the research state in several

ways. First, there was a priority in the research state to provide guidance for creation of high-quality field experiences and expand access to those experiences (Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018; Hewitt & Harney, 2019). The results of this study could address this priority by helping provide students with opportunities to learn, develop, and practice skills and receive feedback in high-quality environments. Second, informing the quality of field experiences for degree students may lead to a better prepared early childhood workforce and retention in the field. This is significant, particularly, in the critical first three years of teaching. Better prepared teachers who remain in the field may lead to increased quality in early childhood classrooms for young children (Boyd et al., 2020). Lastly, high-quality early childhood classrooms and programs have been known to reduce, minimize, and prevent achievement gaps prior to kindergarten entry (Morgan, 2019).

Summary

In Chapter 1, I presented an overview of the need for high-quality practice-based experiences in early childhood preparation programs and addressed the gap in the literature related to this topic. In this chapter, the foundation for exploring the perspectives of early childhood preparation students, mentor teachers, and faculty related to creating high-quality field experiences was described. The description included the problem, purpose, conceptual framework, research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance. In Chapter 2, I present a discussion of relevant research related to practice-based experience; its importance and benefits in preparation of early childhood professionals; the roles of the

student, mentor teacher, and faculty in the triad; and the need for high- quality field experiences.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The problem this study addressed was the limited focus and continued lack of research on high-quality field experiences for early childhood degree students (Fusaro et al., 2022; La Paro et al., 2018; Matengu et al., 2021; NAEYC, 2020; Pihanpera et al., 2022; Sumrall et al., 2017). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood degree students, faculty, and mentor teachers on what constitutes a high-quality field experience and what components of the field experience are most important to creating a positive, quality experience to bridge the gap of limited focus and research related to the quality of field experience. The focus on the field experience triad (i.e., the student, faculty, and mentor teacher) was intentional because of the triad's significant influence on teacher candidates (Dewhurst et al., 2020; Drewes, et al., 2021; Isik-Ercan et al., 2017; J. Kim, 2020; La Paro et al., 2018).

Field experiences, as part of teacher preparation, have become increasingly important in the presence of a global teaching shortage. There is a projection of a shortage of 44 million teachers worldwide in primary and secondary education by 2030 (UNESCO, 2024). In the United States, an estimated 3 million+ teaching positions were reported as unfilled or filled by teachers without full certification between 2021 and 2024 (Tan et al., 2024). "Not fully certified for teaching assignment" includes those who are teaching without any credential or license, in an emergency or temporary credential, in process of completing a preparation program, or with a credential in a different subject or grade level (Tan et al. 2024). The President and CEO of the American Colleges for Teacher Education cited several reasons for the teaching shortage including a lack of

interesting in teaching, federal and state policies with or without intent causing turmoil for teacher preparation programs, the contentious political climate, and the current model of one teacher in one classroom (Gangone, 2024). In response, alternative paths for preparing and certifying teachers are being offered (Day & Nagro, 2025), some with as few as 5 weeks of practical experience (Zinger & Kang, 2025). As field experiences prove to be a contributor to teacher self-efficacy (Alford & Winters, 2025; Johnson, 2017, La Paro & Siskind, 2022), sustainability (La Paro, 2018) and commitment to the field (Heinz, 2024; La Paro et al., 2018), they are an important consideration for retention of much needed, newly prepared teachers.

National and state organizations have called for priority improvement and enhancement of quality field experiences (CAEP, 2022; Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018; NAEYC, 2018, 2021a; NCATE, 2010, 2021) while researchers have indicated that more research is vital to describe the nature and quality of those field experiences (Gallo-Fox & Stegeman, 2020; Johnson et al., 2017; Van Schagen Johnson et al., 2016). Institutes of higher education's (IHE's) early childhood preparation programs continue to provide the primary conduit to the early childhood workforce (NAEYC, 2021a). Field experiences have been embedded within the early teacher preparation standards (CAEP, 2022; NAEYC, 2021a), which IHEs must follow. Those experiences have provided the critical component of preparation where students bridge their knowledge between theory and practice (J. Kim, 2020; Yoon & Larkin, 2018). However, limited literature was available during the past several years regarding field experience (Matengu et al., 2021; Pihanpera et al., 2022) and there was no specific literature that

addressed the quality of field experiences. Exemplars of quality early childhood practice in settings that were supported by experienced mentors were noted as problematic (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Doran, 2020). Contributing to the body of knowledge about this important aspect of preparation of the early childhood workforce could provide greater understanding for improving quality in practice-based experience.

Chapter 2 includes an overview of the literature search strategy that was used throughout this study. The theoretical foundation utilizing the work of Dewey (1938) and Vygotsky (1978) is discussed. Next, to better understand the literature related to field experiences, key variables and concepts have been examined which include: preparing the early childhood workforce, standards that guide field experiences, practice-based experience learning models (traditional model, coteaching, external coaching, Professional Development School, medical/residency, intern-as-teacher models and online field experiences in a pandemic), research related to the field experience triad, and studies related to the individuals within the triad. Chapter 2 concludes with a summary and conclusions from the review of the literature.

Literature Search Strategy

A thorough review of the research was conducted to inform this qualitative study and provide a foundation of background knowledge from previous research findings and recommendations. A search of peer-reviewed journal articles and professional books was conducted using Walden University's online research database. The databases used for this review included Education Full Text, Proquest, EbscoHost, and ERIC open web. Keywords used for the search included early childhood, field experience, practicum,

clinical experience, practice-based experience, student teaching, mentor teacher, student teacher, perspectives, inter-subjectivity, Vygotsky, Dewey, social-cultural theory, scaffolding, constructivism. During the search, it became evident that there was limited research over the past five years on the quality of practice-based experiences. I sought the assistance of a Walden librarian who confirmed limited research specific to early childhood practice-based experiences and suggested an expanded search to include general teacher education and additional years. One finding was that much of the general research on overall field experiences has not been updated in the past 10 years. I added elementary teacher preparation to my search and expanded to the past seven to eight years to include research relevant to the quality of field experiences and the field experience triad. In addition to the online search, I reached out to and met with a researcher and author of several studies that I had found in my search related to field experiences. She is the editor of the *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* and a faculty member at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. She has focused much of her research on practicum and field experiences in early childhood. She confirmed that this topic had not been well published nor studied and my study would provide foundational research on the quality of field experience in the field of early childhood education. After reviewing over 250 articles related to field experience, 81 peer reviewed articles have been included throughout the literature review and Chapter 5 discussion that are relevant to my study.

Theoretical Foundation

The theories that grounded my study are Dewey's (1938) quality of experience in education and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. These theories were foundational due to their focus on the experience in education and social cultural learning through interaction that occurs within the triad during practice-based experience. Dewey argued that the quality of experience in education is significant in the process of learning. He proposed that learners build from prior knowledge and educators need to arrange for the content, interactions, and environment to satisfy the growth and capacities of the student as part of the process of education. When the experience is agreeable to the learner, there is quality, and the active learner then processes and applies learning through experience (Pihanpera et al., 2022).

Shabani (2016) asserted that Vygotsky's sociocultural theories apply not only to children's learning but to adult learning as well. New knowledge is constructed through social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978) and exploration and experiences that build on prior knowledge (Stapleton & Stefaniak, 2019). For early childhood preparation students in practiced-based experiences, education and learning are connected through the student teaching triad which includes the interactions and experiences of both the student and educators. The student teaching triad has been significant in the formation of knowledge, competency, and dispositions of preservice teachers. Within the field experience, this is built on the social process of a shared knowledge base that is developed through interactions with others, learning, scaffolding, and then applying knowledge in the classroom (Pihanpera et al., 2022; Sarvis & Silvers, 2019). In social cultural theory, it is

the responsibility of the teacher (in this case, mentor teachers and faculty) to adjust thinking and practices to meet the needs of the learner (Doran, 2020). Dewey (1938) also asserted that it is possible that some experiences can be mis-educative. When this occurs within the triad, reflective practice comes into play. Dewey contended active and acute consideration of in action (as the event happens) or on action (after the event happens) reflection must occur to assess, analyze and evaluate learning. This type of reflective dialogue should occur regularly within field experience relationships (Loman et al., 2020).

The field experience triad has often been viewed as ineffective, and there have been many efforts to restructure rather than strengthen the model (Isik-Ercan et al., 2017). Exploring the perspectives of early childhood degree students, faculty, and mentor teachers on high-quality field experiences may be a key factor to strengthen this model and build high-quality experiences. Thus, the research questions were formatted to seek perspectives from the triad on what constitutes a quality field experience and what components of the field experience are most important to those involved.

My study explored the perspectives of the three key players, or triad, in the role of field experiences: the student, the mentor teacher and early childhood faculty. These three perspectives were included to explore the quality of practice-based experience and to portray the complexity, nuance, tensions and agreement or disagreement surrounding the concept of high-quality field experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2020) and the components that contribute to that quality. Numerous studies conducted sought information from individual perspectives of either students, mentor teachers or faculty regarding various

aspects of field experiences (Botha & Baxen, 2018; Doran, 2020; Lees & Kennedy, 2018; La Paro et al, 2018, 2020; Quinones et al, 2020, Robinson et al, 2021). However, limited research portrayed all three perspectives. Only one study was found that related solely to the triad. This study included perspectives of expectation of lesson planning and unanticipated challenges within the triad interactions (Katz & Isik-Ercan, 2015).

With foundational viewpoints of teaching in higher education, Pratt and Associates (1998) discussed teacher perspectives as what teachers do and why they view actions as worthy and justified. My study utilized perspectives as an opportunity to lend a voice (Botha & Baxen, 2018) to each participant within the field experience. The research questions were crafted utilizing Dewey's quality of experience and Vygostky's lens of social cultural learning, as well as the National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Professional Standards and Competencies* Standard F (NAEYC, 2021a).

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Preparing the Early Childhood Workforce

Increasing the quality of teacher preparation with an emphasis on field experience has been an ongoing plea in the field of education and more recently, early childhood education (CAEP, 2022; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015; NAEYC, 2021; NCATE, 2010, 2021; National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), 2021). In the United States, there were more than 2,000 early childhood preparation programs at the time of my study. These programs were the primary source of educating the early childhood workforce (NAEYC, 2021a). The quality of preparation of the

workforce has been cited as critical for the outcomes for young children (Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2015). Countries such as Australia, have changed policies to require more preparation for early childhood teachers, such as including degreed teachers in all early learning centers, as a national quality initiative. International research has shown children who have experienced a high level of quality in early education and care settings demonstrated improved outcomes for later academic success (Robinson, et al., 2021).

In the research state, the most recently published report on early childhood preparation programs dated back to 2012. At that time, there were 84 early childhood preparation programs across 34 IHEs (ACET, 2012). As reported by the State Department of Education Workforce Student Researcher at the State Association for Early Childhood Teacher Educator's meeting on February 11, 2022, there were 39 programs in IHEs offering coursework specific to early childhood. Fewer programs existed due to elimination of several two-year programs. Practice-based experiences were required in all four-year degree programs. Many two-year programs employed on-the-job or experiential learning opportunities as well as field experience (ACET, 2012). ACET Inc. (2012) also recommended the research state provide multiple and frequent field experiences in preparation programs as a critical component of helping early childhood preparation students to succeed. This continued to be echoed by the state EC workforce efforts which had prioritized access to high-quality field experiences for all early childhood preparation students (Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018).

Experts locally and nationally have continued to recommend high-quality practice-based experiences (CAEP, 2022; Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018; Hewitt & Harney, 2019; Moses & Harrill, 2022; NAEYC, 2021a). Research studies included a variety of aims for field experiences. The overarching goal was a quality experience that applies academic concepts in an authentic setting and provides hands-on opportunities that support the development of teaching skills to be effective teachers (J. Kim, 2020). It has been noted that these field experiences should be tied to content and pedagogical knowledge to improve teacher preparation (Loman et al., 2020). Researchers have also found that practice-based experience has been an important component of the identity formation of early childhood preservice teachers and commitment to the profession (Heinz, 2024; La Paro et al., 2018). The NCATE Blue Ribbon panel urged that practice should be at the center of teaching preparation (NCATE, 2010).

The groundbreaking document in the field of early childhood education from the Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, *Transforming the Workforce* (2015) called for improvement to higher education programs that not only “aligns, content, curriculum and pedagogy” with core knowledge and competencies for the field but enables the preparation student to apply and practice their knowledge in high-quality field-based learning experiences. Within the field, in the context of reflective practice, students should receive supportive supervision, mentoring and coaching. Practice-based experiences should include a variety of settings and structures with children from birth to age eight. These experiences will help students gain understanding and expertise in their

professional roles in order to support children and families from diverse and multiple family structures, socioeconomic statuses, ethnicities, cultures, languages and abilities.

Field Experience Standards

Standards guide what needs to be included in early childhood preparation programs related to field experience. In the field of early childhood, colleges and universities have followed higher education accreditation standards such as the Council for Teacher Education Programs (CAEP), the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and state professional educator licensing boards as they design and implement preparation programs and field experiences. Accreditation has been known to be a validation that a program or institution met standards set by an organization (CAEP, 2022). However, standards indicate the presence or absence of a standard, but do not measure quality. Standards have been cited as impeding the field experience itself. Drewes et al., (2021) proposed that consensus standards act as barriers to implementing the process of learning in practice-based experiences. Researchers have recommended that more exploration is needed on the nature of, the elements within and the quality of field experience (La Paro et al., 2018; Van Schagen Johnson et al., 2016).

The NAEYC released its revised standards in 2021, *Ensuring Quality for Early Childhood Education Professional Preparation Programs: NAEYC's Early Childhood Higher Education Accreditation Standards*. The standards were revised to include new developments in the field of early childhood. These standards outline the expectations for higher education programs seeking accreditation, with an emphasis on how graduates meet the NAEYC *Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood*

Educators and how programs help students achieve success (NAEYC, 2020a). Standards for preparation programs include:

- Standard A: Program Identity, Candidates, Organization, and Resources
- Standard B: Faculty Characteristics and Qualifications, Professional Responsibilities, and Professional Development
- Standard C: Program Design and Evaluation
- Standard D: Developing Candidate Proficiency in the *Professional Standards and Competencies*
- Standard E: Ensuring Candidate Proficiency in the *Professional Standards and Competencies*
- Standard F: Field Experience Quality (NAEYC, 2021a, p.7)

Standard F: Field Experience Quality is designed to ensure that preparation programs provide opportunities for students to have hands-on experiences with young children in early childhood settings while they develop skills and competency in accordance with the Professional Standards and Competencies (NAEYC, 2021a). Standard F was divided into four categories. In the breadth of field experience category, the standard states that candidates should be provided with practice-based experience in 2 of 3 age groups (infant/toddler, preschool and early elementary). They must have had opportunities to experience two of four early learning settings (home-based, center-based, early elementary and comprehensive service settings). Breadth of experience includes the sites where students have experiences working with diverse populations of children and families. In the quality of field experience category, institutions must include intentional

partnerships with field experience sites that have included criteria/expectations for selection of the site, how the site, program and candidates will work together, a plan and sequence to support preparation, student growth in competency and alignment of practice with the *Professional Standards and Competencies*. Within the supporting cooperating/mentor/supervisor teacher quality category, the program must have demonstrated a method and criteria for selecting mentors, provided support to mentor teachers through training and orientation to encourage positive models of practice, ensured consistent expectations, mentoring and evaluation for candidates, and provided regular feedback and support to mentors and faculty. Lastly, the candidate supports category ensures preparation students are provided with a connection to meaning in their field experiences to the professional standards and competencies. This is accomplished by clear expectations of their growth in competency, alignment of behavior to the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, preparation for practice-based experiences, and ongoing feedback throughout their field experiences.

Of note, Singh (2017) recognized a lack of systematic research on field experiences and explained experiences are not all alike. They noted variability in design, implementation, desired outcomes, duration, intensity, place in coursework, the way field experiences are evaluated, feedback from mentors and supervisors, as well as differences in the learning activities in the experience that create difficulty for researchers to draw conclusions (Singh, 2017). The following studies outline the complexity and variety in the literature on practice-based experience.

Practice-Based Experience Learning Models

Pihanpera et al., (2022) used an integrative literature review strategy to examine the types of educational activities that occur within field experiences at early care centers in university settings. Educational programs utilizing early care and education centers included associate, bachelor's, master's and doctoral level students. A range of applied learning theories and approaches were presented in their review categorized to include Reggio Emilia, constructivist theory, social learning theory, sociocultural theory, psychosocial development theory, Montessori, and learning by doing or playing. Field experiences and educational activities within those programs included observation, coursework, planning activities, evaluating program plans, and working as an assistant. Practicum or practical experiences, which were shorter in length, were typically completed simultaneously with coursework. These occurred largely at the Associate's and Bachelor's Degree levels. Internships, student teaching, and practice-based experience varied in length from eight weeks to one year. Most often, practicum experiences, or student teaching, were implemented under mentors or supervisors who model, improve upon or explain early childhood practices and give feedback. The majority of studies examined various aspects of, or models of, practice-based experiences. Spanning all models of practice-based experience is the focus on bridging knowledge to practice (Durand & Trevino, 2020; Pihanpera et al., 2022).

The traditional condition of field experiences included the triad; the preservice teacher, the mentor or cooperating teacher, and the early childhood faculty from the preparation program. In this model, the preparation student observed the mentor teacher

for a period of time and slowly added responsibility until they were teaching independently. The mentor teacher provided feedback to the student over the phases of the practice-based experience (Stapleton et al., 2021). The university faculty, or supervisor, typically was responsible for assessment of the student's practice-based experience (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017).

Coteaching

Gallo-Fox and Stegeman (2020) examined the coteaching model to determine cooperative practice and expertise in responsive teaching. In this model, students worked alongside mentor teachers to support learning through mutual practice, clarification of thinking, shared decision making and reflection. Both students and mentor teachers learned from one another. In this model, key elements were co-planning, co-responsibility, co-instruction and co-evaluation. This model was most effective when collaboration was evident, there was mutual respect for one another's ideas and there was joint responsibility for student learning.

Another model of coteaching investigated by Stapleton, et al., (2021) involved two or more mentor teachers working collaboratively with a group of students. The students engaged in coteaching practices alongside another student in the practice-based experience sharing planning, organization and delivery of instruction. This model utilized 7 strategies in which students: took turns teaching and observing, teaching and assisting, teaching at learning stations, teaching alongside one another, supporting one another, differentiating instruction, and team-teaching. In this situation, there were higher degrees of collaboration and teaching self-efficacy among the students. A benefit was that there

are fewer classrooms and mentor teachers needed due to multiple students working cooperatively in one classroom.

Similarly, Loman et al., (2020) presented peer coaching as an effective model in practice-based experiences. Within a mentor teacher's classroom, peer coaching was similar to coteaching but involved both observation and feedback by people who were similar in rank or experience, in this case, students. They guided one another through a process of observation, non-evaluative feedback and creation of an improvement plan. In a pre-observation conference, the pair identified behaviors, lessons or strategies to be observed and in a post-observation conference, discussed plans for improvement following the "know, see, do, reflect, improve" process. Findings indicated that preparation students were capable of changing their instruction, engagement and classroom management in the peer coaching circumstance. Reflection also had a positive impact on student beliefs and dispositions. Challenges with this model included the missing voices of the university faculty and the time and resources needed to develop and maintain faculty skilled in peer coaching, as well as adding training for students within coursework.

Lastly, in addition to the coteaching condition, an instructional coach provided a bridge between the university and schools (Stapleton, et al., 2021). The instructional coach supplemented the coteaching model by being on-site in field experiences several times per week, interacting with students and mentor teachers and providing walk through observations and feedback to the student that was in addition to mentor teacher

and university faculty feedback. In Stapleton et al.'s study (2021) the instructional coaching model provided more levels of support in the field experience.

External Coaching Model

Instructional coaching has been utilized in early childhood classrooms resulting in several benefits such as improved quality of classroom practices, more intentional planning for children's needs and improved interactions with children (Hu et al., 2023). These benefits prompted Hu et al. (2023) to examine high-quality coaching as a model for both supporting preservice teachers and developing professional competency in coaches. In this model, external coaches who were certified CLASS observers employed the CLASS framework to analyze teaching videos of students as a means of bridging theory to practice in the student teaching experience. Interactions with student teachers were examined through the use of Thompson's 8 Effective Coaching Behaviors. Hu et al. (2023) found that utilizing CLASS promoted the professional development of coaches as they gained depth of knowledge of learning outcomes for students. It also gave them a framework and system for guiding conversation and reflection with student teachers. At the beginning of the study, coaches put a lot of time and energy into learning the coaching process and paperwork. By the end, coaches grew in confidence and meeting the individual needs, finding strengths and weaknesses of their mentees. Coaches increased competence in coaching practices, helped coaches to identify problems, and assisted preservice teachers in making improvements quickly.

Researchers (Hu et al, 2023) also found there were enhanced relationships with mentees that included professional acknowledgement of coaches, and mutual respect and

understanding. Student teachers' school-based coursework offered an opportunity to consider practice that was aligned with university expectations. Student teachers were found to have increased motivations for and efficacy in teaching behaviors due to combining student teaching practices with designated coaching.

Professional Development School: University-School Partnership

Partnerships and alignment between universities and schools are required as components of educator preparation standards (CAEP, 2022; NAEYC, 2020a). When partnership and collaboration existed amongst students, mentors and university faculty, outcomes for student teachers were improved (Othman, 2023). Realities in education have made this challenging at times, such as constant curricular and assessment changes in districts. This has been difficult for IHE's to monitor and keep up with. Othman (2023) suggested preparation programs incorporate content in coursework that is most commonly utilized in practice in P-12 settings as well as a focus on culture, challenges, and logistical variables rather than formal theories that students may find difficult to apply.

Waters et al. (2021) examined their current practice and responded to findings of mismatched expectations between the university and school noted by challenges perceived by students who participated in field experiences. In response, alignment was attempted by creation of an intentional connection between the preparation program curriculum and clinical experience. They established a pre-internship course for students, a summer face-to-face workshop for mentors with follow-up activities throughout the year, and formal professional development workshops for both mentors and student

teachers that were content and discipline specific. Findings indicated that embedded professional development that included content specific pedagogy and practice benefitted both students and mentors. The mentor-student relationship was a key indicator of practice. Elements of success included; collaboration, communication, common expectations, gradually easing students into teaching practice, and mentors releasing control to allow space for students to grow.

Similarly, Arauj et al. (2021) investigated the joint concentration of student teacher assessment utilized by students, higher ed faculty and early childhood programs in a school-university partnership. Throughout the practicum experience, as a means of meeting legal frameworks and professional performance standards, all members of the triad participated in both formative and summative assessment of the student teacher's progress and development on core competences in observation, planning, action and reflection. They found that inclusion of students in the assessment of their own development, alongside mentors and faculty, contributed to meeting performance standards, professional learning, and strengthened trustworthiness in the triad through assessment transparency. Clear, common expectations and joint focus contributed to a positive experience in the practicum.

Professional Development School Model: Embedded Clinical Practice

In an effort to scaffold student learning throughout their teacher education program, Hilaski et al. (2021) focused on embedded clinical practice in their university-school partnership, in essence, creating a professional development school model. The Professional Development School Model's (PDS) are intended to bring about change in

both teacher education programs and the schools they partner with. Preservice teachers are often placed together in a school community, rather than individually. In their study, the university course was held in the elementary school setting. Embedded clinical practice, cooperative teaching methods and debriefing through Socratic seminars were utilized as methods of student teachers learning in and through practice while having faculty and peers on site to scaffold and support (Hilaski et al., 2021). Findings indicated that student teachers incorporated strategies from coursework and increased the development of their beliefs and practices in authentic ways in classrooms. Due to the low-risk environment, they were able to engage in approximations of practice, increase comprehension of connections between assessment and instruction, and have immediate feedback from their instructor and peers. The researchers called for additional research on systematic use of embedded clinical practice to allow preparation programs to shift practice to the heart of preparation (Hilaski, et al., 2021).

Medical/Residency Model

Similar to embedded clinical practice, a model presented by Vartuli et al., (2016) and Mazzye & Duffy (2021) had similarities to the medical model of doing “rounds.” This was formatted after Dewey’s (1938) laboratory approach where teachers become serious students of teaching children. The medical model includes clinical practice with learning on the job in supervised rounds. As such, students learned through a combination of coursework and visits to classrooms. Professional discussion with peers was followed by time in the classroom where students reflected on their interactions with children, practice, and strategies used. Students were immersed in classrooms with

children with the goal of connecting theory to practice through their rounds and professional discussion. University faculty and supervisors supported students and mentors with professional development that connected theory and practice (Mazzye & Duffy, 2021) Faculty used a framework of inquiry, direct observation, and guided practice throughout this process. The medical or “residency” model focused on a sequence of learning in which students: study and learn, plan and organize, practice with guidance, and finally apply knowledge in the classroom with children. Along the way, they reflect on and evaluate methods for improvement in future practice (Sarvis & Silvers, 2019).

This model provided a promising opportunity for students to build competencies with children as they prepared to be early childhood professionals. The combination of coursework and rounds gave students opportunities to directly apply their learning in authentic situations. Students reported a more collaborative and growth-oriented approach from their mentors, while mentors recognized students as “co-educators” that were engaged in the process of learning (Mazzye & Duffy). Researchers noted that to better implement the residency-based model in the future, programs should consider co-planning time with the mentor teacher and student, developing shared professional language of classroom practices, dedicated space for course instruction during the day and integration of technology.

Intern as Teacher Model

With the presence of teacher shortages across the United States, proposals for both filling vacancies and compensating student teachers have been provided as

solutions. The intern as teacher model replaces teacher induction as it *is* the preparation program. McKie et al. (2024), described the model where the student teachers (interns) were considered the teacher of record, filling vacancies in the school and were considered first year teachers while completing coursework. Interns were supported part-time by a mentor teacher and university faculty/supervisors provided external support. Mentor teachers may have 2 interns to support, each 50 percent of the day. Interns received support through observations, professional development, communication, and common planning times with teachers of the same grade level or certification.

Online Field Experiences in a Pandemic

Due to the emergence of COVID-19 throughout the world in 2020, educational experiences were interrupted. The pandemic impacted, not only coursework, but observations and field experiences (Durand & Trevino, 2020). Ninety-two percent of IHEs switched from in-person to online learning in their early childhood preparation programs during the spring of 2020 (NAEYC, 2021c). Early childhood faculty were required to quickly pivot from traditional practice-based experiences and find and create ways and opportunities not only for their students to observe and interact with children (Durand & Trevino, 2020; Eady et al., 2021; J. Kim, 2020; NAEYC, 2021c) but for themselves as well. New models of practice-based experience expanded out of necessity. Faculty were committed to maintaining quality and created virtual resources, observed field experiences through Zoom, and found ways to teach online and support students in uncertain times (NAEYC, 2021c).

Eady et al. (2021) implemented a new approach to work-integrated learning (WIL) designed to apply theoretical knowledge to work-related settings. Students used videos from peers' field experiences from previous semesters or years to critically reflect on teaching. Reflections were required to be highly grounded in theory, practice and policy. Even through videos, students were found to sense the intricacy inherent to the profession of teaching.

Another approach incorporated learning centers that were established in local churches to assist parents who were working from home. Durand and Trevino (2020) partnered with the school district and learning centers to provide elementary education preparation students' field experiences during this challenging time. The students met with one to five children in small groups during their online instruction. Students were able to observe the virtual learning environment alongside the children as recipients of the learning. Students reflected on the virtual learning environment, classroom management, and engagement strategies. They used tools they observed with their small groups as they supported learning in the church setting. Although challenges were present such as technology, connectivity, and wearing masks, students engaged in on-site experiences and learned that teaching required adaptability and flexibility for everyone: students, teachers and children.

J. Kim (2020) examined the timing of online student teaching, support needed during online teaching, and limitations and possibilities for the future of online practice-based experiences in early childhood education. J. Kim found several limitations such as the technological abilities of early childhood preparation students, mentors and children,

limited experiences with online learning tools, inappropriateness for young children who need hands-on activity and adult supervision in the use of technology, and the students' self-efficacy in teaching using online modalities. There were also opportunities and advantages discovered. Because online learning is not place based or dependent on physical location, it reduced travel time and costs for students who were employed and provided a convenient means of communication with mentor teachers and university faculty. An opportunity presented by the lack of dependence on location was that children from various places, who may have been bound by a physical location, could participate in online programming. This allowed student teachers to engage with children from a variety of backgrounds instead of within a specific neighborhood or community.

The presence of COVID-19 has presented a new aspect of early childhood teacher preparation and field experiences. Preparation programs continue to struggle with finding field placements and classroom observation opportunities for students. There remains a limited number of available mentors due to the continued effect of the pandemic (NAEYC, 2021c). Researchers have noted that IHE's need to adapt programs to better prepare the early childhood workforce in online learning. Preparation programs need to emphasize the need for technology skills and strategies for online teaching for students entering the workforce (J. Kim, 2020) and faculty (NAEYC, 2021b).

Since the pandemic, Jez (2022) suggested IHEs and P-12 schools consider the realities of teaching with social, political and global stressors impacting society. They called out preparation programs and schools need to shift from traditional to transformational teacher preparation in response to increased levels of stress, compassion

fatigue and burnout in both with in-service and preservice teachers. Jez emphasized that when experiences in P-12 classrooms doesn't match coursework, it is difficult to apply theories and methods, and a rift is created between universities and schools with preservice teachers caught in the middle. Now more than ever before, partnership amongst and support for the field experience triad is critical.

Research Related to the Field Experience Triad

This section will include a brief overview of the field experience triad including: relationships (Curcio & Adams, 2019; La Paro et al., 2020; Van Schagen Johnson et al., 2016; Yoon & Larkin, 2018) issues that arise within the triad (Drewes et al., 2021) and community partner perceptions of the practicum (Lees & Kennedy, 2017). The field experience triad was described as the three key participants in the practicum experience; the early childhood preparation student, the mentor teacher in the practicum classroom, and the early childhood faculty at the institute of higher education (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; La Paro et al., 2018). Studies examined a variety of aspects within the complexity of the triad.

Relationships are deemed a critical component in practice-based experiences that can impact learning (La Paro et al., 2018, 2020). In fact, from the student perspective, the relationship is central to their learning experience (La Paro et al., 2020). From a systems perspective, critical elements of the student-mentor relationship included communication, support, feedback, information sharing, beliefs, knowledge, and fit (La Paro et al., 2018, 2020).

Students reported the positive aspects of the relationship most often. However, negative aspects such as frustration can be present (La Paro et al., 2020). Yoon and Larkin (2018) explored mentor/mentee relationships and uncovered tensions between ideology and practice were dependent on multiple factors including personality traits, teaching styles, power dynamics and communication. Pushing and pulling tensions to productivity to define relationships and develop a collaborative learning environment is vital. When students perceived a good fit in the relationship, they reported higher satisfaction in the field experience (La Paro et al., 2020). Components of a good fit of the relationship included similar goals and communication which may also contribute to the student's perception of the fit of the relationship.

To improve the quality of mentor relationships, Curcio and Adams (2019) established an eleven-day summer shared learning experience and internship orientation for mentors and teacher preparation students at the Master's degree level. The goal was to foster mentoring interactions, increase all participants' pedagogical knowledge, and get to know one another as both professionals and individuals through collaborative authentic learning experiences that could be applied in classrooms. Findings indicated that the pairs developed relationships that stimulated and accelerated their ability to participate in mentoring interactions such as coteaching, co-planning, collaborative reflection, and feedback. From the perspective of mentor teachers, the authentic work tasks were one of the crucial features of this educative workshop. This study showed the focus of teaching and learning in the field experience can be accelerated by developing the pairs' professional relationship in advance.

Additional recommendations related to relationships have been cited throughout several studies. Improving relationships required mentor teachers to have deep experience in the field and be trained in and have support with how to mentor students (La Paro et al., 2018). The pairing of early childhood preparation students with mentors needs to occur prior to practice-based experiences (Curcio & Adams, 2019) and consider the “fit” between students and mentors based on the needs of each (La Paro et al., 2018).

In fact, John et al. (2021) stressed the importance of this “fit” or “match” and examined the practices and procedures that resulted in placements of student teachers in districts and schools. They noted that placement can motivate or be preventive in the student’s feelings of success in their field experience. They found there were 5 common steps utilized for student teacher placement. The first step was to collect information about the numbers of students needing placements as well as personal and professional information about each student that may inform placements. Second, a contact was made with the schools or districts to gauge their ability to host student teachers. Third, schools/districts determined their own capacity for students with considerations of grade level and endorsement areas. Here, schools also considered mentor teachers’ abilities to work with student teachers that particular year due to personal constraints or qualities of classrooms. Fourth, meetings were arranged to include the student teacher, mentor, and principal to see if there is a good fit. Fifth, a placement resulted or the process began again.

John et al. (2025) noted that student teacher assignments in P-12 classrooms can influence the outcomes of future teachers through the match with either the mentor or the

school or both. Qualities of the school have been found to impact student success and attrition. Student teachers were more likely to be employed by districts or schools where they student taught. While both teacher education programs (TEP's) and schools had the common goal of creating a successful student teaching experience, competing priorities, varying practices, and outside influences may have impacted placement. Some chose strong student teachers to support mentors who need growth or classrooms that have challenges while others placed students with their "best" teachers. Teacher shortages and attempts to diversify the workforce also played a role in placements. In addition, some TEP may have placed the responsibility of finding a school and mentor teacher on the student teacher.

Relationships also need to be improved between mentor teachers and university faculty in order to have opportunities to model feedback, plan instructional approaches and create ongoing and substantive communication between the practice site and university. Noted as important to include in relationships are: shared power, joint meaning making and reciprocal learning (Yoon & Larkin, 2018). Researchers have recommended that institutes of higher education seek opportunities to employ and research educative mentoring relationships (Curcio & Adams, 2019).

Issues can exist within the practice-based experience triad. In the context of coteaching, evaluation of the preparation student can become problematic and may seem at odds with the goals of co-teaching (Drewes et al., 2021). Adding faculty involvement, as well as the mentor teacher, in the evaluation of the student compounds not only what is happening in the classroom, but also what the student learned from coursework

instruction and whether that learning has supported their practice and how it has improved theory-driven instruction. Drewes et al. (2021) proposed that standards and traditional evaluation systems of preparation create barriers to utilizing a learning-oriented co-evaluation by the mentor and faculty. This study emphasized that evaluating the performance of the pre-service early childhood teacher should focus on practice and competency. Both mentor teachers and faculty need to work jointly and be open to changes in their co-teaching relationships assuming new roles. Operating as an instructional team using reflection and evaluation of practice is favorable (Drewes et al., 2021).

Significant to the field experience triad, Katz and Isik-Ercan (2015) discussed cultural clashes that exist between the university and practice-based experience sites. University supervisors may lack training in mentoring cooperating teachers and may have placed themselves in an authoritative position within the context of the relationship. Arguments have been made that a sense of community and fluidity needs to exist between faculty, mentor teachers and preparation students. The author proposed implementation of *lingua-culture*, the language in culture that includes knowledge, background, grammar and vocabulary, as a critically important consideration in practice-based experiences.

To gain further insight into practicum experiences, Lees and Kennedy (2017) examined the combination of perceptions of community partners and mentor teachers. Through interviews and focus groups, they found that partnership sites suggest consideration within the field experience of the needs of the community and the changing

contexts of the children and families served by their school or organization. They also recommended extended time of preparation students in classrooms to develop relationships with children and enable more sharing of expertise between students and mentor teachers.

Due to the disconnect of quality within the field experience, Burroughs et al. (2020) sought to merge the distinct perspectives of instructional practices by cooperating teachers, administrators, field experience supervisors, and university faculty by developing a framework for describing and guiding relationships within the field experience to create a learning community. Authors proposed six levels of the framework that professionals advanced through over time. These levels outlined the give and take that occurs as organizations work together, eventually leading to partnership and shared learning. The framework described issues in the lower levels such as faculty not having opportunities to discuss with mentor teachers and lack of understanding of field experience placements, assignments and instructional practices. These levels focused on the university taking from or borrowing from schools without a reciprocal relationship or benefit to schools. The framework guided the triad toward a co-constructed partnership and eventually toward a learning community where there are co-constructed program goals, co-construction of knowledge, and shared preparation of the student preparing to work in the field of education. Authors asserted that collaborative efforts can have a meaningful influence on teacher preparation (Burroughs et al., 2020).

Research Related to Individuals Within the Triad

When examining field experiences, researchers have also chosen to investigate aspects of individuals within the field experience triad. Attention has been given to the perspectives of students (Brown et al., 2017; Dewhurst et al., 2020; Doran, 2020; Singh, 2017) and recommendations for mentor teachers (Johnson, et al., 2017; Lafferty, 2018; La Paro et al., 2018, Puroila et al., 2021). There was little mention of university faculty distinct from others in the triad. This may have been due to the fact that often university faculty have conducted the research.

Students

Practice-based experiences were designed to prepare students for their work in the field of early childhood. Research on student perspectives of field experience has shown many additional benefits and outcomes. Development of professionalism occurred for students as they faced complex situations in field experiences (Guevara, 2020). Practice in the field has been shown to be a powerful force in developing preservice teachers' sense of belonging not only during practicum, but also in channeling a sense of belonging (or not) to the teaching profession. It can also be a determining factor in committing to or leaving the program of study (Dewhurst et al., 2020).

Critical to mention is a study by Brown et al. (2017). In their study, they examined perceptions of preparation students, using a comparison to NAEYC Standards for professional preparation, of their readiness to become early childhood professionals as well as their beliefs and attitudes about that readiness. Findings indicated that the learning in field experience provided them with foundational knowledge in child development,

planning developmentally appropriate environments, uses of observation and assessment, and being a reflective practitioner. Students valued field learning and coursework and indicated practice-based experiences contributing to their readiness (Brown, et al., 2017)

The self-efficacy of preparation students, and their personal beliefs of capabilities to accomplish teaching-related outcomes that influence children's development, have been developed through field experiences (Johnson et al., 2017; Singh, 2017). Singh (2017) investigated perceptions of teacher candidates from their first 45 hours of field experience through questionnaires. Findings indicated that opportunities to apply coursework in classroom practice reduced anxiety about teaching and boosted confidence, or in essence, enhanced self-efficacy. Additionally, preparation students' exploration of pedagogical knowledge through field experience made them aware of their strengths and limitations and promoted the cultivation of teacher attributes and the reality of classrooms. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2017) found that as students applied coursework in practicum settings, the perception of their overall satisfaction of their experience was highly correlated with their sense of self-efficacy.

Hojeij et al. (2021) utilized reflective writing to analyze preparation students' perceptions of 10-week field experiences to increase student level of awareness of their teaching and to motivate further exploration of their practice and pedagogy. Students uncovered information about their teaching as well as management strategies utilized by their mentor teacher. They discovered, through reflection, that children learned best when the teacher actively involved children in activities and learning such as when they co-constructed knowledge and problem-solved collaboratively with children.

Botha and Baxen (2018) took a different approach to their study and focused on what students thought was missing in their preparation for early childhood teaching related to their field experiences. Their study addressed three aspects of contextual diversity; geographic diversity, linguistic diversity and the ideal vs. real of classrooms with young children. Findings indicated that students wanted to teach where teachers are needed, in this case, rural settings where they could make a difference. Preparation students needed support in being placed in unfamiliar contexts as there was fear, stress and trauma related to being placed in unfamiliar contexts. Students also indicated that they felt frustrated and unprepared for working with multilingual learners. They noted the importance of shared language with young children in the successful functioning of a classroom of young children. As students were taught best practice in early childhood classrooms, they discerned that the reality was anything but the ideal in many classrooms and felt unprepared for the unexpected conditions in schools. Researchers have recommended that teacher education programs recognize the need for support in field experience when preparation does not match the realities of diverse contexts students face in field experiences.

Mentor Teachers

In the literature, support and mentoring of preparation students have been deemed as critically important (Doran, 2020). Mentor teachers have been a crucial, if not the most influential actor in teacher preparation (Lafferty, 2018). A positive relationship with one's mentor teacher has been identified as essential in the preparation student's learning to teach (Dewhurst et al., 2020; Doran, 2020), their teaching self-efficacy (Johnson, et al.,

2017) and their professional identity and commitment to the profession (La Paro et al., 2018). Unfortunately, the availability of field experiences has been limited by the availability of mentor teachers with the required knowledge, experience and willingness to take on preparation students in classrooms (Doran, 2020).

Mentors viewed mentorship as part of their professional role and identity and enjoyed passing on their knowledge and experience to teacher candidates (Lees & Kennedy, 2017). Motivations for mentoring were found to include bringing different content to their teaching, strengthening competency as an early childhood teacher, maintaining contact with a university and a feeling of obligation to mentor others in the field (Puroila et al., 2021). Roles of mentoring included a variety of responsibilities, some of which are task-oriented and many fall within the realm of relationships. Yoon and Larkin (2018) asserted, mentoring was about blurring the lines between personal and professional as preparation students need support as well as professional guidance. Also noted is that mentors must be able to adapt to and respond to the expertise of students (Lees & Kennedy, 2017). Some of the essential elements of being a mentor included being a positive role model, giving consistent expectations, working collaboratively, emotional scaffolding, holding realistic teaching expectations, enabling students' increasing independence and encouraging joint decision making.

Lafferty (2018) identified part of the lack of defining quality experiences is due to the varying conception of what it means to be a mentor teacher. They examined the significant contributing factors to cooperating teachers' enactment of practices. The largest factor contributing to practice was whether mentors had received any training for

their role. When training was provided, cooperating teachers engaged in more reflective practices and enacted other practices to a greater degree overall. Without training, mentors likely drew from their experiences as student in preparation programs (John et al., 2024; Robey & Krause, 2024). The kind of training mentor teachers indicated as needed included evaluating students in practicum, understanding and developing student learning goals, methods of supervision of preparation students, and basic knowledge of early childhood teacher education programs including goals for the practicum (Puroila et al., 2021).

It has been suggested that institutes of higher education should ensure strong and experienced mentors, especially in diverse communities. Yet, many programs continue to grapple with finding experienced mentors with adequate training aligned with university curricula and best practice (Doran, 2020). Several recommendations have been proposed to improve cooperating teacher quality. Training and professional development were suggested most often (Drewes et al., 2021; Kennedy and Lees, 2017; Lafferty, 2018; Sumrall et al., 2017). A study by Robey & Krause (2024) cited Clark and colleagues use of 11 identified teacher educator roles that referred to cooperating teachers. These roles were as follows: “provider of feedback, gatekeeper of the profession, modeler of practice, supporter of reflection, purveyor of context, convener of relation, agent of socialization, advocate of the practical, gleaner of knowledge, abider of change, and teacher of children” (Robey & Krause, 2024, p. 497). Mentor teachers in the study confirmed that they took part in many of the identified roles and consider them as roles they *should* participate in. Questions emerged from the study related to clarification and complexity

of and within the roles. These roles could be a useful tool in setting expectations for mentor teachers. In addition, providing mentoring, support and improved communication between universities and mentors has been proposed (Sumrall et al., 2017) as well as implementing collaborative roles where mentors and faculty work as co-instructors of preparation students (Lees & Kennedy, 2017). Researchers also suggested mentors need compensation (Lees & Kennedy, 2017).

Faculty

There is little mention of the faculty role in the student teaching triad in the literature, perhaps due to faculty initiating research related to field experiences. It has been presented that faculty have little sway in the student teaching experience with neither the student nor the mentor teacher. The student teachers' passage from theory to practice in the field experience has been largely influenced by the mentor teacher (Robey & Krause, 2024). However, La Paro et al. (2024) called out the complexity of the faculty's role in early childhood preparations students' understanding and implementation of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) which is central to all practice within the field experience. Complexity lies in the variability of 2-year and 4-year programs, varying departments in IHE's, requirements for state regulatory bodies, and regional needs and resources available. The researchers discussed the use of Vygostky's sociocultural theory, whereas the process of both student and faculty construction of knowledge occurs through experience and interaction with people, environments and objects. One could argue, this directly relates to student teaching and field experiences where students' knowledge and implementation of coursework and

DAP is culminated in their hands-on attempts to bridge knowledge to practice guided by learning from mentors and faculty. La Paro et al. (2024) called for faculty to engage in the process of reflection and model in their own teaching their use of DAP. They posited this will empower students to both assess and change their own practice in relation to DAP.

Summary

The importance and impact of practice-based experience on preparation student learning, bridging knowledge from theory to practice and readiness for their role as teachers in the field of early childhood has been well documented (Brown et al., 2017; Dewhurst et al., 2020; J. Kim, 2020; Yoon & Larkin, 2018). There was continued call for prioritizing the improvement and enhancement of the quality field experiences (CAEP, 2022; Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018; NAEYC, 2018, 2021a; NCATE, 2010). In addition, researchers indicated more research was imperative to describe the nature and quality of those field experiences (Gallo-Fox & Stegeman, 2020; Johnson et al., 2017; Van Schagen Johnson et al., 2016).

Most studies discussed the use of the traditional model of field experiences utilizing the field experience triad; the preparation student, mentor teacher and university faculty (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Lafferty, 2018; La Paro et al., 2018, 2020; Stapleton et al., 2021; Van Schagen Johnson et al., 2016). Within the triad, relationships have been noted to be a critical component that can impact student learning (Curcio & Adams, 2019; La Paro et al., 2020; Yoon & Larkin, 2018). Issues have been found to exist within the field experience triad (Drewes et al., 2021) and tensions present (Yoon &

Larkin, 2018). A common lingua-culture has been proposed as an important consideration in practice-based experiences (Katz & Isik-Ercan, 2015). Exploration of perspectives has been utilized in research as a method of gaining insight to field experiences (Johnson et al., 2017; Lafferty, 2018; La Paro et al., 2018) yet much of the research was limited only to student perspectives (La Paro et al., 2020).

Although standards for field experiences exist (NAEYC, 2021a), there has been a lack of research on content, pedagogies and outcomes for the preparation of early childhood professionals in higher education programs (Fusaro et al., 2022) and high-quality practice-based experiences have yet to be determined (La Paro et al., 2018). Researchers declared it vital for the early childhood field to continue to describe and explore the quality of field experiences (Johnson et al., 2017). Additional understanding of the range of experiences and exploration, along with a description of the key elements important to those in the field experience triad, have been identified as needing attention so students and mentors can be supported in preservice programs (La Paro et al., 2020).

My study explored the perspectives of early childhood degree students, faculty, and mentor teachers on what constitutes a high-quality field experience and what components of the field experience are most important to creating a positive experience for those involved. I utilized Dewey's (1938) quality of experience in education and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory to examine key elements of the experience and interactions within that experience of the field experience triad. In Chapter 3, I discuss the methodology I used to explore the perspectives within the triad; students, faculty and mentor teachers.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood degree students, faculty, and mentor teachers on what constitutes a high-quality field experience and what components of the field experience are most important to creating a positive experience for those involved to bridge the gap in research in this area. I conducted this study to add to the body of professional knowledge and fill the gap of limited focus in the literature related to high-quality field experiences for early childhood degree students (La Paro et al., 2018; Matengu et al., 2021; Pihanpera et al., 2022; Sumrall et al., 2017). Field experiences are a critical component of early childhood preparation programs because they are where the student learns, develops, and practices skills and receives feedback (Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018) from their mentor teacher and faculty. The knowledge gained through the current study may be used not only to better understand the quality of field experiences but also for guidance to make improvements to the quality of field experiences students receive in the research state.

Chapter 3 consists of a discussion of the methodology used for the study. This includes a description of the setting in which the study was conducted, the research design, and my role in the study. A discussion of the methodology includes participant selection, instrumentation, recruitment procedures, interview procedures, and data collection. Data analysis, trustworthiness, validity, and ethical procedures and safeguards are also addressed.

Research Design and Rationale

The research questions that were used to guide this study were developed using the theoretical framework of Vygotsky and Dewey as explained in Chapter 2:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty regarding what constitutes quality field experiences?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty regarding what is most important to creating positive and quality field experiences?

The goal of my basic qualitative study was to gain a deeper understanding of perspectives of field experiences from the perspectives of early childhood students, mentor teachers, and faculty through the use of semistructured interviews. Qualitative studies are justified when a researcher seeks to understand a situation or phenomenon by discussing that situation with those who have experienced it (Creswell, 2017). Seidman (2019) described education as a social abstraction that can be understood most effectively through gaining an understanding of the perspectives and lived experiences of those who take part in the educative experience. This description fit the current study because I was seeking to understand the perspectives of quality from the three main participants in the educative event. A qualitative approach was ideal because quantitative methodology would not have elicited the depth of understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the early childhood triad.

A basic research approach was chosen as I sought to contribute to knowledge and theory (Ravitch & Carl, 2020) related to field experiences in early childhood preparation programs. Several other approaches were considered but not deemed appropriate. Case study research seeks to study real life events that are bound by time and place (Creswell, 2017). As I sought to understand multiple perspectives within field experiences, this was not an appropriate approach. Action research involves addressing a specific problem within a practice-based setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As my goal was to help understand the perspectives of the field experience triad and a specific problem had not been previously identified, this approach was not the best fit. While narrative research focuses on the lived experiences of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2020) through stories, it typically focuses on one or two individuals. I was seeking multiple perspectives across multiple institutions to provide depth to the understanding of quality, this would not have been possible with one or two individuals.

The problem of a lack of literature on high-quality field experiences and the demand for quality in field experiences also contributed to the choice of qualitative methodology. Field experiences are complex; they are not a “single, observable reality” that could be measured quantitatively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 9). Each member of the field experience triad holds their own reality, interpretation or perspective of this particular event from how they engaged in the experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To better understand what constitutes high-quality field experiences, I needed to construct meaning from how each member of the triad interpreted the quality of a field experience.

I utilized Dewey and Vygotsky's theories and NAEYC's Higher Accreditation Standards, Standard F (NAEYC, 2021a) as a framework as I developed interview questions.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher in qualitative studies is the main mechanism of data collection and analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I was actively involved in the study by selecting participants, conducting interviews with participants, and analyzing the data. It is important to consider the researcher's role in positionality and social location in the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). I was careful and considered both the positive and negative aspects of my role in research. Due to many shared experiences, I would have been considered as having insider status in a variety of aspects of my research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I have been an early childhood preparation student, mentor teacher and am currently a female Caucasian educator in an early childhood preparation program. The majority of the early childhood workforce, in the research state, is female (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2020). These shared experiences may have assisted me in developing rapport with participants. In some circumstances, I had outsider status. For instance, there is a growing number of students of color and immigrant students in early childhood preparation programs in the metropolitan area. Additionally, it was important to include preparation programs that were outside the metropolitan area to lend experiences in smaller and rural field experience settings. My involvement and position in the field of early childhood have provided me with knowledge and background related to field experiences. This means my knowledge and experience as a student, mentor teacher and faculty member present innate biases and

subjectivities as I approached my study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended identifying them as a source of potential influence and contribution to the study.

As a faculty member in the state college and university system, faculty participants in the study have been colleagues with whom I have professional relationships through professional organizations, conferences, and past work. I did not have a supervisory relationship to faculty participants. I was careful not to let this relationship present bias or influence my interpretations of data or expectations of their responses. In the case of students, they may have considered my position as faculty a position of power. I was careful to not include students from my university for whom I was the instructor during their internship or student teaching experience. Although the students in the study have already graduated, some students may not have been comfortable or given truthful information if I had been their faculty supervisor.

It was my goal to appropriately manage interviewer/participant relationships throughout the interview process. To avoid common pitfalls as described by Burkholder et al., (2016), I prepared for interviews and allowed plenty of time to present a calm environment. I developed an interview protocol with main questions and possible probes. I used Zoom to audio-record and transcribe the interviews. I took notes during the interview and transcribed the interviews immediately afterward. The audio recordings were saved on a password-protected cloud account. Audio recordings were used to review interviews transcripts for accuracy. I also took notes about my thoughts and used reflective journaling throughout the research process to identify any biases, assumptions and personal views.

Ethically, I kept several things in mind throughout the interview process. Above all, I needed to assure the participants that it was my intention to do no harm through the research process (Seidman, 2019). I followed all institutional protocols as set forth by Walden University and the IRB process. I ensured participants had prior informed consent, confidentiality, and respectful interactions with me. I adhered to the requirements of the IRB process and informed consent.

As the primary researcher, my intent was to learn more about the perspectives of students, mentors and other faculty about field experience quality. However, from searching the literature and my own, personal experiences, I held assumptions about what elements are needed for high-quality practice-based experiences and needed to be aware of my biases. I listened carefully, and tried to avoid body posture, language or other signs that communicated judgement, agreement or disagreement (Burkholder et al., 2016). I utilized open-ended questions to assist in maintaining an unbiased response.

Methodology

Participant Selection

My research study was conducted in colleges and universities in a Midwest state. The state college and university system was the home to multiple early childhood preparation programs throughout both metropolitan and rural areas which were part of this study. Five triads were sought from colleges and universities from across the system and state. A triad consisted of an early childhood preparation student, faculty and a mentor teacher, who had been involved in field experiences, from selected colleges or universities.

Participants were recruited from colleges and universities that offered early childhood preparation programs in which graduates had participated in a student teaching experience. Sample selection in qualitative research is usually purposeful and small, rather than large (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To reasonably cover the research questions regarding field experiences, a goal was set to include a minimum of five colleges or universities were selected. I included three within the metropolitan area, a private university, and one program that served the northern part of the state in a more rural area. From each college and university, a triad of university faculty, mentor teacher and early childhood preparation student was sought to be individually interviewed. The goal was to include 15 total interviews; five faculty, five mentor teachers and five preparation students. The variety of institutions and roles were intended to ensure perspectives were gained from a variety of settings.

Group characteristic sampling was selected as it is a method of gaining information that is specific and vivid to each group and can reveal group patterns (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). To ensure balance in the study, participant groups represented corresponding experiences while also representing a variety of points of view (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Participants included early childhood degree students, faculty and mentor teachers. One early childhood student, one mentor teacher and one faculty member from each college or university program was selected as a means of ensuring triads have had similar experiences with field experience placements. Early childhood degree students had completed student teaching, graduated from their degree program and were working in an early childhood classroom prior to the interview. Faculty and mentor teachers had at

least one year of experience working with early childhood degree students in a field experience. A short questionnaire with demographic and background information (see Appendix F) was distributed with the consent form (see Appendix G) to ensure participants met the criteria above

Researchers, especially beginning researchers, often obtain a connection to qualified interviewees through social networks or people they know (Seidman, 2019). Participant selection began by utilizing network sampling as I contacted early childhood faculty through our local professional organizations, ACCESS and AECTE, by e-mail. 6 faculty volunteered to participate. Faculty then identified mentor teachers and students who met the criteria above. Contact information was shared by faculty.

The sample size was selected due to several factors. It is recommended that the researcher consider participant size that would provide reasonable coverage of the research questions in the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Saturation cannot be predicted numerically in qualitative research so reasonable accommodation strategies for forecasting saturation may be employed. Experts recommend a minimum number of participants needed as a prediction to reach saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). There were five universities and 10 colleges in the research state's college and university system that offered early childhood preparation programs that were located throughout the state. In addition, several private universities offered early childhood programs. Thus, as a prediction of saturation, the base of five institutions was used.

Initial recruitment included contacting the state faculty organizations for two-year and four-year institutions; Associate Degree Early Childhood Teacher Educators

(ACCESS) and the Association for Early Childhood Teacher Educators (AECTE).

Faculty members identified mentor teachers and students who have participated in their early childhood preparation programs who were sent an e-mail invitation and information about the study. In order to gain perspectives from a variety of settings, 5 institutions were selected. This number also anticipated the feasibility of the study. Conducting 15 individual interviews was attainable and reliable for this small research study.

Instrumentation

The approach to my study was a basic qualitative inquiry design in which the quality of field experiences was explored through semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were formatted drawing from terminology presented in the National Association for the Education of Young Children's Higher Education Program Accreditation Standards Standard F: Field Experience Quality (NAEYC, 2021a) and grounded in Dewey's (1938) quality of experience in education and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Questions were created to draw from the interviewees' experience in field or practice-based experiences to orient the study. A tour question was used as an opening to the interview (Seidman, 2019) as a means of orienting myself to the participants' experience, establishing a comfort level with the participant, and assuring credibility. Ideal position questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) were used to elicit responses regarding components of field experiences that were most important to creating quality. Well-developed, open-ended questions were used as recommended by Merriam & Tisdell, (2016). Probes were used as necessary to elicit additional detail or information.

An interview protocol was developed and was employed throughout the study. The interview protocol was grounded in Dewey's (1938) quality of experience in education and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. Theoretical connections were made related to the quality of experience and interactions within practice-based experiences and the significance in the process of learning and NAEYC's Higher Education Accreditation Standard F: Experience Quality which designates standards for providing preparation students with opportunities to observe and practice with young children and develop competency according to the *Professional Standards and Competencies* (NAEYC, 2020a). Each section of Standard F was addressed with participants to share perspectives from participants' role in alignment with the research questions.

Interview responses and researcher notes were maintained for each participant. The interview protocol included the date, interviewer, interviewee, recording documentation, an introduction to the study, interview questions and potential probes, a conclusion to the interview session, and the next steps for the data and permission to contact the participant to gain clarification or member checking (Burkholder et al., 2016). Content validity was established by utilizing the NAEYC Early Childhood Professional Preparation Standards (2021) Standard F: Field Experience Quality as a guide for developing questions. Two other early childhood experts reviewed questions and gave feedback on alignment related to theories and NAEYC's Higher Education Accreditation Standard F: Field Experience Quality. The protocol was reviewed by a colleague with expertise in qualitative research. After both reviews and piloting the questions, the

interview protocol was revised according to feedback. The interview protocols (see Appendix A, B, C) were created for each member of the triad with an introduction and background to the study, a warm-up, or tour question, in which interviewees could describe their experiences with field experience, open-ended questions regarding the quality of field experiences, a question regarding an “ideal” field experience, and finally, a closing question asking if anything was missing from the discussion. To gain information, without adding to the interview time, demographic and background information (Appendix, D, E, F) regarding the participant, settings, types and age groups of the field experience was added and completed prior to the interview. This helped to orient me to the background of each participants’ field experience.

Individual interviews were conducted through Zoom. A benefit to using Zoom was neither myself nor the participants needed to travel which enabled data to be collected from various colleges and universities throughout the research state. Interviews were no longer than 60 minutes in length. Zoom was also desirable due to the ease of recording and transcribing the interview sessions. Recordings have been stored for a minimum of 5 years on my password-protected computer and password-protected Zoom account.

Data Analysis

A goal of my qualitative research study was to uncover and interpret meanings from participants’ experiences. Data analysis included finding common or re-occurring patterns and themes that described the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) related to the participants’ perspectives regarding high-quality field experiences. Simultaneous data

collection and analysis occurred throughout the study as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Brief notes were taken during the interviews so as to not distract from the conversation to highlight the interviewer's thoughts during the process. To maintain accuracy (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), the interview protocol was paired with transcriptions of the interview for each participant and triad. To collect and manage data the Altasti program was utilized. Data analysis included both deductive and inductive analysis. A priori codes were developed using the NAEYC Standard F for field experience, the theoretical framework, the interview protocol, and reviewed literature. A priori codes were *quality, relationships, support/s, communication, feedback, environment, breadth of experience and common language*. Inductive analysis included creating codes and categories, followed by searching for, analyzing, reviewing, and defining themes to make sense of the data.

Coding method decisions were made before, during and after the preliminary review of the data. I used two cycles of coding as recommended by Saldana (2021). Data included participant responses to interview questions from the interview protocol. Precoding and preliminary jottings were utilized as opportunities emerged in the data collection and formatting process (Saldana, 2021). Using background and demographic information and the NAEYC Field Experience Standard F as a framework for the questions helped to provide contextual knowledge about the field experience. Data was categorized to further identify codes, categories and themes from the interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using constant comparative methods, open codes were grouped into more comprehensive categories. The names of these categories were drawn from my

knowledge, the participants' words, and the review of literature on the topic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) while keeping the research questions and theoretical framework in mind. Perspectival triangulation of the students, mentors and faculty was used in the coding process as a method of seeking such nuances as range, agreement, disagreement and tensions withing the data as a whole (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Discrepant cases were considered an informative part of the study and data were considered particularly in the inclusion of a 6th faculty interview. I also utilized colleagues with experience analyzing and interpreting qualitative data as a means of an external audit as thought partners to challenge my thinking and assess whether the data is reflected in my interpretations (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

The results of my study may improve the understanding of what constitutes high-quality field experiences and components of the field experiences that are most important to creating a positive field experience. Data has been viewed only by the researcher and has been stored in a locked cabinet. Numbers were assigned to each college/university and letters assigned to each participant (Student=S, Mentor=M, Faculty=F) to retain the confidentiality of participants. Colleges or universities were described as “a university in the metro area,” a “college in a rural area,” and so forth.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Validity and trustworthiness is used in qualitative research to discuss the process and approach that researchers used to ensure credibility in their study (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Qualitative research is unique in that the goal of inquiry is to gain a deeper understanding and the conclusions need to make sense to the reader, practitioner or other

researchers. Some experts choose to discuss the concept in terms of validity and reliability which involves carrying out a research project in an ethical manner (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The standards the researcher uses to ensure trustworthiness in the study can be discussed in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Credibility (Internal Validity)

In my study, the goal was to understand the perspectives of early childhood students, mentor teachers and faculty regarding what constituted a high-quality, field experience and what components contributed to a positive experience. Several strategies were used to establish credibility in my study. Triangulation of multiple sources of data can be used to substantiate emerging results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By nature, my study utilized perspectival triangulation which included a range of participant roles and settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2020) within the field experience. Early childhood students, mentor teachers and faculty perspectives were explored as well as the inclusion of five different college and university settings. This provided multiple sources of data surrounding the quality and components of field experiences. Participant validation was achieved by providing a summary of emerging findings to participants allowing for feedback to ensure their experiences have been captured (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Sufficient engagement in collecting data and time spent with the data looking for variations are an important consideration in credibility (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). It was important to look for both supporting data and data that support alternative explanations. Thick description was also used as a strategy to enhance credibility and

transferability by thoroughly describing and detailing data, research context and setting and providing enough contextual factors of participants' thoughts and experiences so that readers are able to also make interpretations of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Transferability (External Validity)

Transferability relates to how the findings of one study may be applied to other situations or contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As mentioned above, thick description is important as the researcher needs to provide enough descriptive data for the audience or reader to make comparisons to their own contexts or transfer aspects of the study or findings to their situations (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

Strategies to achieve this included consideration of my description and details of data, quotes and researcher notes, as well as clarifying contextual relevance in interpretations and my write-up of analysis. Maximum variation in the study sample is another strategy recommended to improve transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By nature, my study included variation in both the roles of the participants and the variety of settings. This may enable a range of readers to apply findings to their situations.

Dependability

Dependability is the qualitative counterpart to reliability. Research can be considered dependable if results are "consistent with the data presented" (Merriam and Tisdelle, 2016, p. 252). Strategies that help researchers safeguard dependability include triangulation, the researcher's position and the audit trail. A research journal was used to keep notes and thoughts of interactions with the data, questions I thought about, issues I

encountered, and decision making showing how the study was conducted and data analyzed.

Confirmability

Qualitative researchers strive for confirmable data or data that is free from unacknowledged researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Strategies can be employed in the data collection and analysis process such as triangulation, researcher reflexivity and external audits. I considered if I was imposing my agenda on research interpretations or findings using a research journal. I considered how to alter my methods when that I occurred. I found that utilizing participant quotes helped me to stay true to their perspectives. I employed the use of dialogue and thought partners and an expert reviewer to challenge my thinking, discuss and review issues related to my subjectivity and positionality.

Ethical Procedures

Research ethics in qualitative research is complex and multidimensional. It involves procedural issues within the university and with the Institutional Research Board (IRB) as well as relational and transactional issues (Ravitch & Carl, 2020) between the researcher, participants and to some degree, the field of study. Above all, the research study should do no harm to participants or within the field of study. The intent of research should be to contribute to the knowledge base of the field and to impact positive social change. Central to the research are the procedures and approvals needed to conduct the study. I submitted and obtained approvals from the university IRB detailing my study procedures, data collection and storage. Data collection began after I received IRB

approval from Walden University on January 16, 2024. The IRB approval number was 01-16-24-0465990

I created an invitation to participate in the study that was distributed to early childhood faculty at colleges and universities in the research state. Faculty were asked to forward the invitation to mentor teachers and students who meet the criteria for the study. Those who agreed to participate were given a consent form with a description of the study, the risks and benefits, confidentiality of the study and anonymity of participants, how participants will be involved in the study, participant time commitment, ability of participants to discontinue the study at any time, financial incentives of the study, member checking, how the results will be stored and disseminated, my contact information and institutional affiliation, as well as the participant's signature of consent (Ravitch & Carl, 2020). Participants will also be alerted when the study is complete and how they can review the study if they are interested.

Data collection via interviews were collected by Zoom and scheduled at the convenience of participants. Interviews were no longer than one hour in length, were recorded and transcribed, and stored confidentially on my password-protected computer and password-protected account for five years. I contacted participants after initial transcription and provided a summary for member checking to each participant. As stated earlier in the chapter, I kept several things in mind throughout the interview process to ensure I considered the positive and negative aspects of my role, positionality, and relationships within the research process (Ravitch & Carl, 2020) as well as potential conflicts of interest.

Summary

In this chapter I outlined the methodology of my qualitative study on the perspectives of early childhood students, mentor teachers and faculty on high-quality practice-based experiences. The setting, research design and rationale and role of the researcher were addressed. Discussion of the methodology included participant selection, instrumentation, and data analysis followed by issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures that will be ensured throughout the study. Chapter 4 will describe the data collection and analysis of the study in detail.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood degree students, faculty, and mentor teachers on what constitutes a high-quality field experience and what components are most important in creating a positive high-quality field experience. I was seeking to fill the gap in the literature related to this topic. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty regarding what constitutes quality field experiences?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty regarding what is most important to creating positive and quality field experiences?

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the study design and summarize findings from my research. First, the setting is described, including participant demographics. Procedures for data collection are outlined, including the number of participants and how and when data were collected, followed by a description of the data analysis process. The chapter concludes with a presentation of results with support from the data.

Setting

Sixteen semistructured interviews were conducted through Zoom in a single Midwest state in the United States. Participants were recruited from urban and rural colleges and universities in the state that offer early childhood preparation programs. Recruitment was initiated through professional organizations of 2-year and 4-year

faculty. Faculty who volunteered to participate identified mentor teachers and students who were willing to participate from their institutions. All participants were sent invitations to participate, potential Zoom meeting dates and times, and consent forms for participation. Two research state urban colleges and three state university programs (two urban and one rural) and one private suburban university were represented in this study. To gain multiple perspectives on field experiences, I included a minimum of five triads including one faculty, one mentor teacher, and one student from each college/university early childhood preparation program. An additional college faculty participated who was unable to find mentor and student counterparts. The data from the faculty was included as their perspective included outlier information not mentioned by other faculty participants.

A short questionnaire with demographic and background information (see Appendix F) was distributed with the consent form to ensure participants met criteria for participation. Student participants had completed student teaching and had completed their degree program, and four were working in early childhood classrooms at the time of the interview while one was unemployed. Faculty participants had several years of experience working with early childhood degree students via field experiences prior to participating in the study. Mentor participants were experienced in their roles ranging from 2 to 17 years in their current positions. One teacher was new to mentoring students. All participants in all roles were female. Most participants were White and non-Hispanic. Two students and one faculty were Asian non-Hispanic (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Research participant	Age	Ethnicity	Experience in ECE (years)	Setting in which students are placed
S1	45–54	White, non-Hispanic	21–25	Suburban
S3	25–34	Asian, non-Hispanic	1–5	Urban
S4	25–34	Asian, non-Hispanic	1–5	Suburban
S5	18–24	White, non-Hispanic	1–5	Suburban
S6	35–44	White, non-Hispanic	11–15	Rural
M1	35–44	White, non-Hispanic	16–20	Suburban
M3	45–54	White, non-Hispanic	11–15	Urban
M4	45–54	White, non-Hispanic	6–10	Suburban
M5	55–64	White, Non-Hispanic	26–30	Suburban
M6	25–35	White, non-Hispanic	1–5	Rural
F1	55–64	White, non-Hispanic	26–30	Suburban, urban
F2	55–64	Asian, non-Hispanic	26–30	Rural, suburban, urban
F3	55–64	White, non-Hispanic	30+	Urban
F4	65+	White, non-Hispanic	30+	Suburban, urban
F5	55–64	White, non-Hispanic	26–30	Rural
F6	55–64	White, non-Hispanic	30+	Rural, suburban, urban

Data Collection

Data collection began after I received IRB approval from Walden University on January 16, 2024. An initial interview was conducted in February 2024 for approval by my committee. The remainder of interviews took place between April and June 2024. Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted through Zoom in a single Midwest state in the United States. Participants were recruited from colleges and universities in the state that offered early childhood preparation programs in both metropolitan and rural areas. Recruitment was initiated through professional organizations of 2-year and 4-year faculty. Faculty who volunteered to participate identified mentor teachers and students who were potentially willing to participate. All participants were sent invitations to participate, potential Zoom meeting dates and times, and the consent forms for participation.

Interviews were conducted through Zoom and arranged to meet convenience of participants. I followed the interview protocol corresponding to the participants' roles in the study. Interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length and audio recorded and transcribed via Zoom. Participants were invited to follow up by e-mail if there was anything that they thought to add after interviews. Extenuating circumstances during interviews included one person joining the Zoom from Cambodia where they were visiting family and another participating during a storm where the internet connection became inconsistent. Turning cameras off during part of the interview assisted in a stable connection.

Data Analysis

My data analysis process began by reviewing audio transcripts. Many nuances involving conversation or language needed to be adjusted and corrected for accuracy from the Zoom transcription. I read through and edited for corrections to become familiar with each transcript. All names of participants and timestamps were removed to ensure confidentiality, prepare text for analysis, and reduce bias. Transcripts were uploaded in ATLAS.ti software for initial analysis. As a beginning researcher, I not only needed to familiarize myself with software but also the overall coding process. I found it easier to begin with highlighters, pencil, paper and post it notes to begin coding. Once, I became confident implementing open coding and using a priori codes, I transferred the coding process to ATLAS.ti.

To discover and interpret meaning from participant perspectives related to field experiences, data analysis included finding common or re-occurring patterns in data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used a priori and open coding simultaneously in first cycle coding. From the 16 1-hour interview transcripts, 125 codes were identified (see Table 2).

Table 2

Examples of Open Codes

Code	Participant	Excerpt
Communication	M1	“then so with the student teacher she, you know she was there on the days, and she wasn’t there [I would] E-mail her, or she, would e-mail me. So, we did a lot for e-mail communication”
	M3	“I kinda asked them what they need. I rely on the students to tell me what they need.”
	S6	

		“Communication, building relationships, all of those things are would be important, too.”
Mentor engagement	M5	“This the engagement. Of everybody. You know my engagement. The student teachers, engagement, the professor’s engagement.”
	F2	“They were all excellent, because I had a lot of buy-in from the teacher. They supported them. They took their role very seriously.”
Relationship	M4	“And the more minutes she was in the room, the stronger that relationship got and the stronger she felt about sharing. That was a real big thing for me, and the relationship building, of course.”
	S6	“...also having those relationships, I still message my mentor teacher in the preschool setting and ask her things, or even just tell her funny stories. But it is, was good to have to build a relationship and network with someone. My university supervisor, too. in that way. I’ve asked her, emailed her a question. And she’s emailed back with some insights or resources that I could try.
Mentor teacher knowledge/training	S1	“That probably gave me a different experience than maybe someone that was working with someone not in that same place in their career, and that brought to me high quality.”
	M3	“I was somebody’s mentor and was like, isn’t there a training for this? What am I supposed to be, and oh! yeah, there is. Well, halfway through the year, there might be a training that what didn’t happen then. And the video, just to my knowledge, came out this year. So I really haven’t had any training”
Faculty engagement	M1	“I wish the professor would have checked in.”
	F6	“..as a early childhood professional in my community the more that I show up at people’s centers or at development meetings or at community events, and connect with the people who are my potential cooperating teachers, and I develop a relationship with them.”
Expectations	M3	“...maybe an explanation from the Professor. This is what we’re looking for. In this class. This is what our class is about. This is what the student hopes to gain by being in your classroom”

	F5	“...sometimes the teachers who hadn’t had a student before, had questions like, what? How much can I expect?”
Common expectations	S5	“but she didn’t really know either what to expect. But (the program) does give them like paperwork and like information, what they need from them, and what we’re expected of. So that we’re on the same page and I think it’s very clear.”
		“Once field placements started we would send the expectations like this is what these are, the 3 things that have to happen, or I should say, in your classroom, here’s some other things that we would love for them to see are you cool?”
Student engagement	F6 F4	“She [the student] just had them all so engaged. It was so fun.”
	M6	“It’s mostly because they just kind of they don’t ask the questions. They don’t interact.”
Time	M5	“I think there’s definite advantages to having a longer okay, longer experiences”
	F4	“more time actually hands on in the site watching them”

After reviewing open codes several times and finding several individual codes that could be merged, axial coding was used to make comparisons and connections across codes to form categories (see Table 3). Table 3 presents examples of the 17 categories generated by the open codes.

Table 3*Examples of Categories and Open Codes*

Category	Open code	Participant	Excerpt
Clarification of roles	Field experience coordinator	F3	“The field director takes the responsibility of you know, making that connection introducing. And you know all those blah blah blah, all of those training and stuff.”
Concerns and issues	Standards as obstacle	F6	“We didn’t want to turn teachers out that just like, here’s the standards I met them”
Engaged in the experience	Curriculum/SES Framework	F5	“So they got to see different, you know, ways that curriculum was implemented, and learn about it.”
Faculty characteristics	Faculty knowledge	S5	“Faculty is super knowledgeable about early childhood has so much background.”
Ideal	Lab school	S6	“I think then it would be easier for that to happen, because you would have classes with humans in in a space and hopefully with kids, too. and so I think that would be natural, more natural in a setting on a campus, especially if they have a childcare site on campus.”
Importance of communication	Feedback form	M1	“They had an evaluation form at the end, which was nice for me to fill out the score. You know. That was good.”
Indicators of quality	Release of control	S3	“...letting me teach and take on the full case load way earlier than it’s expected. So that kind of pushed me to be who to be in my own classroom right now.”
Mentor characteristics	Mentor teacher: model best practice	F4	“Sometimes the mentor is really really good at like modeling what they want, but then giving the student free reign to make mistakes and try out their own ideas and run with those.”

Categories were further evaluated for similarities and correlations, as well as relationships to research questions, and refined into five overarching themes (see Table 4). Themes that emerged were: communication, clear and common expectations, and roles outside the triad, mentor and faculty engagement, student growth, motivation and individualized support, practicum site quality and environmental factors, and challenges and barriers to high-quality experiences (see Table 4).

Table 4

Themes and Axial Codes or Categories

Theme	Axial code or category
Theme 1: Communication, clear and common expectations and roles outside the triad	Clarification of roles Expectations Importance of communication Indicators of quality Site selection
Theme 2: Mentor and faculty engagement	Mentor characteristics Motivation for mentors Faculty characteristics Engaged in the experience Reciprocal relationship
Theme 3: Student growth, motivation and individualized support	Student characteristics Motivation for students Supports for students
Theme 4: Practicum site quality and environmental factors	Practicum site characteristics Environment
Theme 5: Challenges and barriers to high-quality field experiences	Concerns and issues Indicators of quality NAEYC Standard F

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility (Internal Validity)

My goal was to understand perspectives of early childhood students, mentor teachers and faculty regarding what constitutes high-quality, field experiences and what contributes to positive experiences. Several strategies were used to establish credibility in my study. Perspectival triangulation was used by including a range of participant roles and settings (Ravitch & Carl, 2020) within the field experience. Five different colleges and universities from rural and urban settings were included and the various roles in each setting were represented: early childhood students, mentor teachers and faculty perspectives. This provided multiple sources of data surrounding the quality and components of field experiences. Second, participant validation was achieved by providing a summary of emerging findings to participants allowing for feedback to ensure their experiences had been captured (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Sufficient engagement in collecting data and time spent with the data looking for variations was recommended as an important consideration in credibility (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). To allow for both supporting and alternative-explanation data, each participant was given ample time to reflect on and respond to questions. Both participants, and myself, used clarifying questions throughout the interviews to make sure questions and responses were understood. Thick description was used as a strategy to enhance credibility and transferability by thoroughly describing and detailing data, research context and setting and providing participants' thoughts and experiences through

use of quotations while addressing themes. Use of the semi-structured interview protocol assisted me in providing consistency in data collection.

Transferability (External Validity)

Transferability was addressed by utilizing thick description of participant roles, backgrounds and perspectives of field experiences through thorough documentation. Strategies included consideration of description and details of data, quotes and researcher notes, as well as clarifying contextual relevance in interpretations and write-up of analysis. Maximum variation in the study sample is another strategy recommended to improve transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My study included variation in both participants' roles and settings. This enables a range of readers to apply findings to their situations.

Dependability

Dependability was ensured by carefully documenting each stage of the research process during data collection and analysis. Strategies I employed to safeguard dependability included triangulation of participant perspectives and maintaining an audit trail to keep notes of my thoughts and interactions with the data. Memos were also documented in ATLAS.ti while moving from codes to categories. I also kept a research journal of interactions with the data which included questions I thought about, issues I encountered, and my decision making. The interview protocol also provided consistency throughout interviews.

Confirmability

In my efforts to strive for confirmable data or data that was free from researcher bias (Ravitch & Carl, 2020), I employed strategies throughout data collection and analysis process such as triangulation, researcher reflexivity and external audits. I continuously considered if I was imposing my agenda on research interpretations or findings by keeping notes of my wonderings in a research journal. I employed the use of dialogue and thought partners several times throughout the study and an expert reviewer to challenge my thinking, discuss and review issues related to my subjectivity and positionality and bias. Utilizing reflexivity safeguarded against inclusion of my own beliefs and assisted in focusing on the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore perspectives of early childhood degree students, faculty and mentor teachers on what constitutes high-quality field experiences and what is most important in creating positive, high-quality field experiences. In this section, I further explain the data collected and the five themes that emerged in response to the research questions. The five themes were: (a) communication, clear and common expectations and roles outside the triad; (b) mentor and faculty engagement; (c) student growth, motivation and individualized support; (d) practicum site quality and environmental factors; and (e) challenges and barriers to high-quality experiences.

Theme 1: Communication, Clear and Common Expectations and Roles Outside the Triad

The most discussed topic by all participants in their perception of high-quality field experiences was the importance of communication. Communication was documented in 176 quotations throughout the 16 interviews. This theme examined not only communication itself, but understanding expectations of the field experience, having common expectations amongst members of the triad, and the additional roles that emerged as present in the field experience, and communication between students, mentors and faculty. Participant M3 emphasized the importance of communication by stating, “Clearness is kindness, right? Communicate so we all know what to expect. It makes it [the field experience] less nerve wracking”. M5 stated, “The ideal would be good communication between all 3 parties [mentor, faculty, student].”

Participants reported communication occurred in several modalities; in person discussion, by Zoom, through e-mail, and through assignments or weekly forms completed by students and mentors. Communication began prior to field experiences most often through e-mail as M5 described receiving “a welcome e-mail and faceless contact at the beginning” of the field experience. All 6 faculty participants most often described communicating with students and mentors by e-mail, through online discussions, or use of forms completed by student/mentor. Faculty also reported communicating with students and mentors during observations that occurred two times during the experience. As an outlier, F5 visited sites and communicated weekly.

Mentor and Student Communication

The most frequent communication was between mentor and student teacher as they worked alongside one another in classrooms. Mentors described the types of communication they had with students. M3, M5, M6 reported fielding student questions about their classroom or early childhood related topics, as well as the student teaching experience. M1 and M3 added that they asked students what they need. Explicitly M3 stated, “I rely on students to tell me what they need”. M5 stated they would often talk through different strategies, share back and forth and she would prompt the student to try new things. She reported that communication and collaboration was helpful and stated, “Working as a team... being comfortable to give your input, feels like it creates a high-quality experience”. M3 specified being intentional to initiate questions to prompt student thinking. M1 stated she and her student talked about future employment and career choices. M6 encouraged her student teacher to “ask all the questions you can possibly think of because this is the last time before you go into the real work... you are in your own classroom and then are not a lot of people you can ask”.

Students concurred with the type of communication that was occurring with mentors. S3 affirmed she was able to ask mentors questions and reported that her mentors all had different teaching styles. S1 valued communication with her mentor and perceived herself as excelling based off of communication. “I was constantly connecting mostly with my mentor because that is who you are spending the most time with in the field, not only are we are talking about it, looking at it together, [we are] making a plan together”.

Faculty and Student Communication

Faculty had less opportunity than mentors to communicate with students directly during the field experiences. All 5 faculty who conducted student observations, reported communicating with students following observations immediately following the observation or in written form by e-mail. F2, F4, F6 reported weekly electronic communication by discussion, e-form or e-mail check-ins respectively. F1, F3, and F5 related that student group meetings occurred during student teaching experiences either with faculty or field experience coordinators. S1 perceived communication with faculty and other students as contributing to quality. She appreciated, “knowing I could reach out to faculty and ask questions and not feel bad for not knowing. That was a big thing.” She valued a “timely response and support from faculty”.

Mentor and Faculty Communication

Mentor and faculty communication was reported as less frequent, however, several mentors discussed that more frequent communication was desired. In the case where the faculty was on site weekly, M5 stated that she felt comfortable talking with the faculty. She expressed, “If I had a concern, she was always willing to listen and gave me insight on a couple of students.” However, most of the communication was directed to students. M5 reported F5 saying “I love what you do here and I love that students come here.” Faculty reported communicating with mentors at the beginning of the experience (F1, F2, F4, F5), at observations (F5, F6) and if there were issues (F1, F2, F3, F4). F2 explained, “I don’t have a lot of interaction with the cooperating teacher, unless we have a problem.” and F3 stated they are involved only upon request by the mentor; most

mentors communicate only with the university supervisor. F4 and M6 conveyed mentors were required to fill out a weekly e-form of what students completed or what they discussed with students that week.

Mentors, however, desired more communication from faculty. M4 stated the area with the most need for improvement was better communication between faculty and mentors. M1 discussed mentor check-in several times wishing, “the professor would have checked in more or I would have e-mailed her more” as she wanted to make sure she was doing the right thing. M3 would have appreciated an introduction and explanation of the purpose of the work students are doing, “I don’t even know what they write for class. I didn’t get to read it. I don’t have any follow up for them [from faculty].”. F1 acknowledged that communication with mentors could be improved by “giving examples of how mentors could share feedback, have conversations with and answer student questions, engage in problem-solving and tell students about how to work with your colleagues, handle conflicts with co-teachers”. She stated faculty should provide more support through having more conversations with mentors.

Expectations

All participants concurred that there was some form of written expectations for the student teaching experience. Several faculty discussed a student manual, handbook or packet that outlined the student teaching experience (F1, F3, F4, F5). F4 noted they also have a website which had all student teaching materials and on-line orientation accessible to students for support. Students could share the website with their mentors if they choose. F3 noted that the student handbook is “touched on in most courses...when they

go out to student teach, they are fully aware [of content] and we will be doing this together.”

Meetings are often used as a way to set up expectations at the beginning of the field experience. F1 meets with the student and mentor, explaining the handbook and assignments, “making sure they both understand why they are there”. F2 mentioned meeting with the student and mentor to “set a clear expectation at the beginning ...this is the kind of culmination you are going to have to do in this experience.” F4, F5, and F6 discussed meeting with students and sending expectations by e-mail to mentors. “There is a whole process of what we talk about and what it is going to be like [for students] including good etiquette in classrooms, observing and assignments” (F5). F3 reported, “Mentor teachers are already aware if they have done it before, they know what to expect”. F6 stated she sent expectations to mentors, “This is what the things are that need to happen, here are some other things that we would love for them to see. Here is the expectation of you...you are going to have to submit an observation, fill out a disposition survey, this is what you can expect from student. There is clarity of what should happen.”

Understanding Expectations and Lack of Clarity

Clarity and understanding of expectations were reported by participants as elements of the quality of field experiences. Mentors appreciated having expectations as well as being asked about their expectations. M1 said, “I knew my expectations and I liked having clear expectation. Here is what you are supposed to do. That was helpful in my first time in the role.”

M4 discussed receiving an outline of mentor expectations and an evaluation form for evaluating student activities. She stated it was “really straightforward. It really helped me with looking at an activity and gave me a framework for talking about it [with the student].” S1 found clear expectations from the beginning with no surprises to bring stability to her work. She had a checklist which she referred to as a means to ensure she was on track. S4 stated she understood that in the field experience the expectation was, “to help out, get feedback to improve me teaching and I practice with my mentor and plan the activities”. M6 talked about appreciating e-mails received from students, prompted by faculty, asking questions about expectations for students from mentors, and stating what students expected from mentors. One mentor discussed re-evaluating expectations they had from their own experiences as student teachers. “Ok, she’s not doing the same program, not getting the same degree that I did so, I had to reevaluate my expectations” to meet the program in which the student attended. M5 talked about adjusting expectations based on student prior experience stating “if your expectations are high and they are not met, it can be disappointing”.

Mentors and students also discussed that expectations were sometimes not clear. M5 described being frustrated when expectations did not match. “Students expecting one thing and the professor expecting another. Students were excited about taking over a full week, then faculty saying they can pick pieces, and I thought ‘that’s what they’ve been doing all along’”. M6 stated that mentors and students needed to be on the same page or it’s “really hard”. S3 explained that there was differing expectations about time management and what was due when. M3 felt she was missing expectation of what

needed to happen in the field experience and had questions such as, “Should they be leading a group? How many hours of observation? Should they be included in meetings What are they supposed to be witnessing?”. Similarly, M1 expressed wanting more clarity and direction about what the student should be doing and what the mentor should be doing.

Need for Clear, Common Expectations

Participants in all three roles of the triad noted they perceived higher quality of the field experience when everyone had common expectations that were clearly communicated. F5 described communicating expectations to all 3 to keep everybody in the same loop, making sure all e-mails were copied to students and mentors. She stated, “That seemed to help the quality because we are all operating with the same ideas about what needed to happen by giving information all at the same time”. M1 felt it was “nice to know head of time” what the expectations were for each person as they all had the same information to work from. She stated that it helped her “make sure she was supporting her [the student] and giving her progression to take over everything”. S3, S5 and S6 all concurred that each member of the triad had clear and common expectations. S3 stated, “it helped them make sure I was doing what I was supposed to do”. S5 described how this helped them work jointly to plan growth from beginning to the end of her student teaching. S6 described common expectations and communication to students so they can get help, answers, better understand, and problem solve.

Several mentors shared ideas for improving expectations. M4 advocated for being “really clear” in all steps of communication and expectations, and laying out a really

clear plan for everyone of what kind of experiences the student needs including the number of hours the student should be the lead teacher, by which week, and percentage of planning the student should be doing. M6 suggested a checklist of everything the faculty wants to make sure mentors and students are “hitting everything”.

M4 shared a strategy used at another university. She described a formal meeting with mentors and students in one room clarifying expectations in a very explicit way. She described having clear guidance of experiences mentors should provide and what they are expected to evaluate. M6 thought implementing an overview of the early childhood classroom expectations may be helpful. She thought it could be something like, “This is what we do in our pre-k room, this is what we expect of our students [the children], and this is what you will be seeing in our classroom” as helpful to the students’ and faculty’s expectations. M1 simply stated, “Next year, I’m going to have a meeting at the beginning of the year and go over expectations. I’m going to be a big girl and say what I want them to do”.

Roles Outside of the Triad

Two additional roles that were involved in communication about expectations emerged during interviews. These two roles existed within some university field experiences outside of the field experience triad. Views about the value of these roles varied based on participant. A field experience placement coordinator was employed in three of the programs. F5 describes this position as someone who “coordinates the logistics with getting people placed correctly through the district” and also runs the student teaching seminar. There were mixed reviews by faculty and mentors regarding

the involvement of this position. F3 said that position takes responsibility for connection between student and placement site and training for mentors. She stated that the field experience coordinator at her institution had an amazing connection with placement sites and good communication. F5 worked “as a team” with the placement coordinator for placing students. F6 stated that faculty could not be involved in setting up field experiences and felt that the formality “got in the way of making good placements”. She felt faculty knew student needs and could help with a student/mentor fit and could share information about which sites to not utilize.

A university supervising teacher was mentioned in one setting. F3 describes this position as an adjunct faculty who observes and mentors on behalf of the university instead of the program faculty. S3 reported the university supervisor observed her four times. S3 reported this as a negative experience and did not find the university supervisor helpful, she wanted information such as, “I want to know if I needed to change? How I’m working with the kids? How can I do better with small group activities? ...She was not there to help me when I needed help. She was just blabbering about her life story...I’m not getting anything out of this process...I asked my mentor teacher”.

Theme 2: Mentor and Faculty Engagement

The mentor teacher role is considered influential in the field experience as the student teacher spends the majority of time with the mentor. F1 considered the mentor teacher the most important component of a high-quality experience and stated, “A quality experience would be somebody who can model best practice. Not just model, but mentor and coach the student as well”. She recognized that mentor teachers were educated and

expected to work with children. In the mentor role, they are now also expected to work with adult students who are preparing to be teachers. M5 described, the mentor teacher's role as to "Model best practice, encourage the student, evaluate what students are doing, give positive feedback, guide and help with questions they might have". Faculty and mentor participants reported that for the important role of mentoring student teachers, mentors have little to no training nor compensation. F6 stated, "They don't get a lot of training or support. I don't even know if they get any money. It's a lot of work".

F1, F2, F4 stated in their programs, mentors have no formal training. F5 reported that due to recent state changes with professional educator licensing standards, mentors for students who are in licensure programs are now required to have training. F3, F5, F6, concurred, however F5 described this training as a "mini-training, a short on-line video". F5 also added, "The video included practical things that could be done like giving a tour of the school...and what it means to coach or mentor to a student teacher". Although two mentors were aware of the video, it became required after they had already been mentoring for some time.

Mentors discussed wishing they had received training to help them with various parts of the field experience. M3 relied on what she knew from being a student teacher. She recalled thinking, "I was somebody's mentor and I was like, isn't there a training for this? What am I supposed to do? I think training is lacking, expectations are lacking". M6 stated she had no training as a mentor, but wanted her student teachers to know they could ask any question of her. M1 stated that training on how to direct others and give feedback would have been beneficial. She discussed feeling like directing people was

something that the role of a mentor required, and it was not her strength. She stated that when someone obtains a degree in early childhood education they "...signed up to teach [children], they didn't teach us how to tell others what to do in the room. That was outside of my comfort zone". M4 reported, "When it came to the documentation part, I was really thrown; I needed to be prepared to assess and document way more than I thought". She stated that if she would have been trained and prepared, she would have been able to give the student a more high-quality experience. Participants also noted there was little to no compensation for cooperating teachers to mentor students. Those who did receive a stipend, the amount was reported by F5 as being, "small...I mean small. But, it's a way to honor them for their time". F6 said, "They maybe get fifty bucks from us". Mentors who did not receive a stipend were reported to receive certificates of appreciation, in-service hours, or relationship-based credit.

Mentor Knowledge and Experience

Mentor participants varied in their years of experience in the field of early childhood education as indicated in Table 1. F5 stated that field experiences were high-quality due to that fact that mentors were experienced, licensed, trained early childhood teachers who were respected in their roles. Students also valued their mentors' knowledge and experience. S1 noted that working with a mentor who was more educated and at a different place in her career brought quality to the experience. S4 and S5 noted that their mentors had previously worked with student teachers. S3 expressed that because her mentor was experienced, her mentor brought more value to the experience than the preparation of her coursework. She felt her coursework was elementary

education focused and she learned more about early childhood from her mentor. She said, she was able to “observe the teacher, ask questions, lead a small group, and morning meeting. She [her mentor] was giving ideas about how to teach, I observed her voice when talking to children, listening to her ideas how to support students throughout the day, I can use that in my future classroom”.

S6 viewed her field experiences as high-quality because her mentors were both experienced teachers who worked in the field and were willing to take student teachers. “They were hands on ... knowing that someone was there in case something flopped or she could answer a question – she was always there. It felt good to have that supportive person watching and giving feedback she was also good at asking what could go better... what could we try next time?”. She stated it was good to have an experience in the field expectation for mentors before they have a student so that they had good communication skills, were knowledgeable about their field, child development, and quality practices. S6 noted that “She [the mentor teacher] was comfortable with and invested in letting me learn and be a good teacher. Having them give me that experience was valuable, probably most influential, that my mentor teachers wanted me there”.

Motivation for Mentors

Participants throughout the interviews agreed, that mentors are not trained, well supported or compensated for their role as a mentor in a field experience. As M5 described, there are times they are assigned the role of mentoring students, rather than choosing to be a mentor. However, participants agree that when mentors *want* to have student teacher, it impacts the quality of the experience. Cooperating teachers mentor

others for several reasons; helping them to feel seen, contributing to their own quality, pride, sharing knowledge, and contributing to the field. M1 and M3 discussed wanting others to see what they were doing in their classrooms as others do not see what they do. M5 noted appreciation of this as well. M5 and M6 appreciated faculty acknowledgement of their work or classrooms. M6 said it was nice to hear you do a great job and kids are so lucky to have you as a teacher and stated “It’s rewarding”. M5 appreciated that F5 commented, “I really love that students come here, cause I really like how you do things here”. M1 also stated she felt validated as a professional by sharing the work they have done in the classroom as a teaching team. M6 talked about enjoying having a student teacher because it gave her new perspective and helped to keep her motivated. She stated the student kept her, “a little bit more on top of my game... I also think it is higher quality because I have a bit more focus on what I’m actually doing instead of just autopilot... I had to show her how to actually do the job”. Pride was also mentioned as a reason for being a mentor. M3 stated, “Makes me feel proud to have been a XX University student, and now mentor teachers from there and to be a teacher in the XX school district. Look at these great things we do!”.

Sharing Knowledge, Resources and Contributing to the Field

M1 and M5 expressed sharing knowledge and resources and modeling teaching as a motivation. M1 stated she had worked hard to improve her practice and liked sharing the ideas and resources she had developed over time. Both M1 and M5 discussed talking to students about how they implemented practices but also shared that students could adapt or find ways that worked better for them. M6 said, “I want them to see how you

should be teaching”. Cooperating teachers recognize that they are contributing to the field through mentoring students. M5 described, being “Excited when I saw growth in the student teacher. That made me excited and happy when they were totally engaged”. M3 mentioned feeling “honored that they’re coming to me- it’s rewarding to be seen as a mentor to feel like I have something to share with others...It’s been pretty lovely...I also want to get the word out about XX [early childhood program] needing teachers”. M1 shared her excitement about helping the next generation of teachers and stated,

I can go through that with her and help her like see, you plan this one thing, you’re gonna hit science, cognitive, physical [development]. We can go through and show her like this... you can do this! It’s like really is easier than you think. I’m gonna have you do this today...she would watch how I do things and then she would do it that way. Here’s how you can manage behavior, learning and have fun and you know bring it back together and have high expectations for kids.

M6 also recognized as a parent that it was contributing to the world of future educators. “it was fun seeing which teachers might possibly be teaching my kids. It’s rewarding because they are taking some of my stuff and then using it in their own life”.

Recommendations for Mentoring

Participants also shared ideas for improving practice for mentor teachers. F2 shared concern “Sometimes my students are the most educated people in the classroom, so I’m finding the quality not near what I would like it to be”. She stated this was related to how mentors were prepared and compensated and that changes needed to be made. Students, faculty and mentors reported that cooperating teachers should be someone that

wants to be a mentor and is accepting of a student in their classroom. Next, all faculty said mentors should be compensated to recognize their work with students. Faculty and mentors agreed training regarding working with student teachers was needed and should include content specific to coaching and mentoring early childhood students. Content for mentor training should include modeling developmentally appropriate practice and experiences (F1, F4, F5, F6) and how to give feedback and coach early childhood preparation students, laying the foundation of skills for working with an adult learner (F6). F5 specified making sure cooperating teachers can model and support preparation teachers in all of the ideas they have learned in coursework such as social emotional development, behavior guidance, individualization, and learning through play. F4 asserted the mentor needs to be organized and know where they want to go. She stated they need know how to:

point to the goal and at the same time be flexible with how to get to the goal...giving the student free reign to make mistakes and try out their own ideas and run with those-it does not have to always be one way- not one size fits all...that goes not only for young children but also the student... [the mentor needs to] be confident in their approach but flexible when they need to adapt...that's really important.

F6 suggested a method of training similar to what she had done at a past university, where they brought community programs together and asked what programs needed from the university. They started doing professional development that benefitted the community programs while also trying to develop good mentor teachers at the same time.

Participants had additional ideas for how to ensure mentors were high quality. F6 suggested mentors need to be ready to mentor the next generation. The mentor needs to determine, “I’m ready to do this, I’m ready to teach adults. That makes a huge difference to want the student and have the skills to help them”. F5 recommended that mentors should be licensed and invested in early childhood and connected to the bigger systems of support within a school district. She described that those who “Felt like they were in a professional role really help the quality come up”. F2 concurred that the mentor needed to take their role seriously and stated “When there is buy-in from the [mentor] teacher... both the mentor teacher and student are in it for the learning experience”, there is higher quality. F6 noted that mentors need to recognize their role. F1 suggested an assessment tool to assess if the person was a good mentor teacher and if not and what areas could she use professional development in so that training could address that in the future.

Faculty Characteristics

In the research interviews, early childhood faculty were the least discussed member of the field experience triad resulting in less than 50 quotations throughout the 16 interviews. F1 considered their own role as being “not as much of a significant factor [as the mentor]” in the field experience. S1 agreed, “It’s really the supervising teacher who makes the biggest difference and the higher ed faculty gives support, provides consultation, conflict resolution and the right resources”. However, S5 stated her faculty member was “super knowledgeable about early childhood...has so much background...she brought in so much to our classroom when I was learning”. S6 noted, “it felt good to have both mentor teacher and university faculty...I value their feedback

about my lessons... constructive criticism and ideas as well...they were both giving me ideas on how to improve things”. S4 mentioned that her faculty gave support throughout the field experience giving advice or suggestions each week. Since graduation and working in the field, S6 has continued to e-mail her faculty seeking insights and resources to issues. She noted her faculty member is involved in the preschool cooperative in their town and stated, “it’s nice to have a local resource who really knows what’s out there for me”. As a discrepant case, F3 acknowledged the faculty knowledge of the student in Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development. She stated, “You know more about the student teacher, where they are and how to scaffold their learning”.

Faculty Satisfaction and Motivation

Faculty member participants discussed several sources of satisfaction and motivation for their role in the field experience that they described as contributions to quality. Problem solving, the growth and success of the student, contributing to the profession, and new learning were mentioned in interviews. Five faculty participants discussed finding satisfaction in the field experience from helping problem solve with students and mentors. F1 stated, “When they are not in a quality program or their supervisor is not high quality – that’s when it becomes interesting and challenging for me to come in and provide feedback, problem solve and try to help the student”. F3, F4, and F5 described specific situations where they were brought in to help facilitate problem solving in the field experience. F5 stated “It was so wonderful to have another colleague, problem solve and talk about things and share ideas”. F6 appreciated being called on for problem solving as she stated it showed, “I trust you enough to come in and be vulnerable

enough so that I'm asking for you to come in when I'm struggling with something". S5 and S6 also discussed faculty expertise in having value with problem solving.

Student Growth and Success as Contributions to the Profession

Faculty considered student growth and success as adding to the quality of the faculty experience. They also expressed that helping prepare students contributes to the early childhood profession. F1 voiced feeling excited when students "knew what they were doing and have really great lesson plans". F4 stated, "The joy that I get out of it is what is great for me. When the wheels are working in the right way with the mentors and students and kids all working towards the same goal and experiencing new insights. It's just really fun". F4 specified that observing students in classrooms showing what they know is often different from what is expected in coursework. "They just shine when they finally get a chance to try it out so it's been really, really exciting".

Learning and Children

Within the field experience, faculty also reported opportunities for themselves to learn. F4 discussed getting new ideas at every observation. F3 said, "I learn from my students, from my colleagues, from the environment. I feel that we all learn from each other." When F5 was out in field experiences she thought, "That is where the quality went up for me. Meeting teachers, going different places, seeing [learning in] different programs". A couple faculty specified seeing children as part of their learning and quality. F4 said "You see these children's faces and they're always excited to see you and curious about who you are and what are you doing there and it's really fun". F5

emphasized being approached by children to read a book or invited to play and stated “...you know it was always about the children”.

Faculty Engagement

When being asked to imagine the ideal, engagement was discussed both for and on behalf of faculty. M1 thought faculty should engage and communicate more and that it was “important for professors to check in to make sure the field experience is going well or not going well”. M5 suggested that for herself and for faculty, “High quality is this: the engagement of everybody... student teachers, faculty, professors working as a team”. She suggested, “engagement is probably the top thing... when everyone is engaged...and able to transfer that knowledge that you know that they’ve learned and being able to see their knowledge in action”.

Theme 3: Student Growth, Motivation, and Individualized Support

Theme 3 centered around the student. Topics that emerged in interviews revealed characteristics of the students, things that motivated students in their field experiences and supports that were built into coursework and practicum, or were present within the field experience. The most commonly mentioned characteristic of students was having prior experience in classrooms with young children. Participants expressed that prior experience could be working in the field, prior practicum experience or even observation. However, experience in the field in early childhood setting was preferred. M3 noted that students need to understand the differences between early childhood and elementary education, teaching practices, and expectations of children. F6 stated that many traditional students lack experience in classrooms, those who do have experience, tend to

do well student teaching. F1,4, 6 agreed that students need more experience in the field prior to practicum to enable students “jump in” and do well. M5 confirmed, that those students with more experience with kids had more realistic expectations, more engagement, and greater comfort level. M3 said, “...observing first, to see how things are done...makes is a more relaxed experience for everybody”.

Students also perceived prior experiences in early childhood to be beneficial in their success in student teaching. S5 had been a nanny but had not worked in a classroom and noted the difference and learning curve. S6 noticed that because there was limited field experience in their program “it made it harder for some of my peers” when they got to student teaching. S4 suggested that students should volunteer or work in early childhood to determine if early childhood education is a good fit. She pushed herself to volunteer in an early childhood setting to become more comfortable because she did not have prior experience. She reflected on the fact that practice before student teaching was helpful for building her confidence, comfort level, understanding of the classroom, and ability to learn faster during practicum. For S1 and S6 who had been working in classrooms, there were advantages. “Things felt natural and normal...I was able to take my prior knowledge and experience and implement that into practicum...that was like a foundation for being successful,” said S1. S6 was in agreement and stated that because she had worked in a lot of settings, she had observed things she wanted to try and things she did not want to do in student teaching. She expressed, “experience and a knowledge base of working in a setting gave me advance perspective and a leg-up. Prior experience was valuable to me”.

Confidence

Confidence surfaced as an element contributing to the quality of field experiences. Mentor teachers, M3 and M6, talked about confidence as a factor in student success in student teaching as it enables them to interact and take on leadership roles more quickly and also as contributing to the positive experience as a mentor. Lack of confidence results in students sitting back and observing. M6 hypothesized that “Ones that are maybe not real sure they want to do this...they seem a little less confident in themselves”. They also recognized that when students come in pairs, they seem more confident and relaxed.

Faculty discussed student confidence as something that needed to be nurtured in a practicum to create a positive experience. Faculty F4 attributed lack of confidence in students who have not experienced an early childhood setting and believed it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the student. She believed you could boost a student’s confidence, and if you remind students that it was ok to make mistakes as part of learning, and that you don’t need to be perfect, they could then use the time to show what they know in the classroom. F6 stated that within a positive field experience, students should be gaining confidence to be a professional rather than a technician and have the ability to learn to make their own decisions to benefit children.

Students talked about their own confidence levels and contributing factors to their confidence. S4 said, “I was uncomfortable and not confident...but I learned to adapt...my mentor and faculty said, ‘Don’t worry about it, you will learn. Take time to build up your skills’.”. Mentors were instrumental in building student’s confidence. S6 said that her mentor showing trust and giving flexibility and independence to try new things and do

things on her own was a “huge confidence booster...it also kind of proves I can do it...like Wow! I did that and it felt good to have someone know it was good for me to do it”. S3 concurred that having her mentor give her responsibility increased her confidence. “She threw me in like the 4th week-she knew I could handle it.”. S5 discussed her mentor talking to her about her growth in confidence from beginning to end and telling her she was “ready” contributed to her having a positive experience.

Recognizing Students’ Individual Knowledge and Strengths

Mentors, faculty and students acknowledged that recognizing student knowledge and strengths added to the quality of the experience. M4 valued creativity and engagement in students. M3 appreciated the background experience of the students and then focused on asking a lot of questions to prompt students to “dig deeper” in their knowledge. F3 stressed the importance of recognizing that student teachers are “capable of many things and come with a load of knowledge from their own cultural heritage and community... their lives are so rich and full of experiences. We need to recognize and accept that and identify and use their strengths”.

Students perceived acknowledgement of their knowledge and strengths as adding to the quality of their experience. S1 discussed taking a different path and seeking education later in life and appreciating that her knowledge and experience was valued during her field experience. Information from her mentor teacher and university faculty assisted her in “knowing where my strengths were and what growth needed to happen”. Despite an age gap, S3 discussed her mentor’s ability in recognizing what she could do with new learning, sharing what had worked in the past but encouraging her to try things

from her point of view. Similarly, S6 felt both her mentor and supervising faculty “valued my ideas and thoughts and gave me flexibility in what I wanted to try or do”. S4 stated, “I am not born in the US. I moved from my country to live here and like feeling like you are part of the class feels good and accepting and learning together and talk together -that feels good”.

Motivation for Students

A significant aspect of a high-quality field experience for students was the application of their knowledge in actuality. The hands-on practice with children and families and the ability to develop their own practice from prior knowledge was perceived by students as contributing to the value of the experience. Students move from coursework to student teaching where, F1 and F5 noted, that there are real kids and things are actually happening around them. Practicum experiences give students insight of the reality of the classroom, children and families. F5 stated. “She [the student teacher] went to a Saturday event with parents...I think it was a bit of an eye opener for her...like when you meet the parents of particular students [children] and you think “A-hah!”. S4 learned about how big of a role families play in supporting and helping children. She talked about the opportunity she had in student teaching to “understand about their cultures, talk to them, approach them, and listen to them...they have a lot to share”. S6 perceived that real kids and practice with real mentor teachers to observe, as well as working collaboratively with her mentor and university supervisor, made the experience high quality. She was able “to try thing out with someone who’s experienced and knows the kids”. Sense-making from prior coursework developed through students’ hands-on experience.

Each of the students described some aspect of learning and satisfaction due to the culmination of these real-life experiences. First and foremost, was learning alongside and interacting with children. S3, S4, S5 and S6 all described the experiences with kids as “fun” and enjoyable. S5 stated, sometimes a couple kids could be challenging, however, “...they loved learning and just wanted to get to know you”. There were also reports of learning *with, about, and from* the children. S5 talked about hands on learning with her kindergarteners. She also described learning about a child who needed different supports during group time and trying a variety of strategies to “adjust to meet the needs of students” and in this case, help the child be successful. S4 enjoyed learning about “their cultures and overall personalities... we play and sometimes I sit and listen to them. They tell me about their home and family if they are comfortable with you, they’re gonna share everything”. Real children made it possible for S6 to “see what the kids were interested in and what they would like to do...that made it more high quality than just making a plan for kids you had never met before...it made it more real life for what kids need more than a scripted lesson”. S5 also found value in the results of her student teaching in “...helping children learn and seeing learning in progress”.

Sense-making and developing their own practice through hands-on experience were also perceived as valuable. S4 describes this as using college coursework to connect with real-life. Not just helping in the classroom but, actually pulling from all of her work from classes and implementing her learning in an early childhood setting. Sense-making was described by S4 as she stated, “We are learning and practicing at the same time and it makes more sense... Then we also reflect – we can think about it... we can problem

solve,” during the process of applying past knowledge to learning. S5 and S6 talked about the value of using past knowledge, creativity to experiment, and trying things in the classroom. “We created things ourselves...I made my own [curriculum]. I learned how to implement curriculum and adjust to meet the needs of my students [children]. I think that’s why I have been so successful teaching and it was just cool because we got to try it,” stated S5.

Support for Students: Sequencing

There was consensus reported from students, mentors and faculty regarding the sequencing of student teaching experiences, although lengths of time of the experiences varied. Each student teaching sequence was reported to start with observing, then adding activities and supporting the classroom, followed by leading small groups and large groups and gradually moving to full classroom responsibility. F5 talked about the sequencing starting prior to student teaching, “They talked about what it would look like in a classroom once you’re in a preschool classroom, and that there is really not a role for just sitting there and observing, the children will draw you in”.

M3 mentioned that she liked that students had observed first to see how things were done in the classroom, she felt that “made it a more relaxed experience for everyone” by starting out slowly. M5 stated that after the second week, she liked to have students try being in charge of something new each day. F4 agreed and noted, “then sometimes teachers [mentors] would actually ask them for specific help like ‘Can you sit at the small group table? This is what we are going to do.’ So a lot of them were in charge of small groups right away”. M1 appreciated faculty working to support students

by advising students to take it slow stating, “if you are working, and in class, you are going to get overwhelmed if you do too much just to try to get it done faster”.

The length of time and number of days per week varied for student teaching experiences in early childhood classrooms. The length of time of the field experience was as little as 4 weeks or as long as 15 weeks. However, the number of hours was noted as approximately 120 hours for most. Some students were 1 day per week in the classroom which had benefits and drawbacks as noted by M1. “One day per week was nice because if it didn’t go so great, it was just one day, one story, one lesson and it didn’t throw off learning [for children] and also let me relax a little”. She thought it would be better if student teachers were there, especially at the beginning, “every day for a week to get to build up the routine because if it’s one day a week it’s too far between... sometimes you forget or lose comfort level”. F6 stated that the short time period of four weeks, doesn’t allow much room for taking over for a whole week. M5 said many of her students chose the third week to teach because the fourth week was typically graduation for the preparation students.

Problem Solving

Several mentors and faculty also discussed problem solving with students as a support present in field experiences. At times, problem solving is mentor directed. M6 notes students sometimes have a discrepancy between what they learned in their coursework and practicing in a classroom. She discussed that when you do real life it is not exactly what you learned in class. She stated students say, “I learned this in school but you guys are doing it this way...well yeah, because this way is what actually works”.

M5 said she and her student teacher would sit during prep time and talk about different strategies for solving children's group time issues and try them together. "She would share ideas, I'd share ideas". F6 asked students what they were struggling with stating "tell me what it is and let me know. I might have some ideas to help you".

Observation

Mentors, faculty and students considered observations as a component of support in the field experience. Mentors and faculty used observation, both informally and formally, as a method of assessing student knowledge and practice. M3 was a graduate of the same program her student teachers were attending. She reflected on the program learning and stated, "As I was observing, I was going, I learned all of these things in school... am I seeing this or not? Am I seeing all the things learned?". This enabled her to assess what the student needed feedback on or more practice with. M5 also reported sitting back, observing and taking notes in order to give feedback.

Faculty also used formal and informal assessment. Most faculty observed 2 times during the field experience. The number of times faculty observed was related to the number of students enrolled in field experience. F2 reported she "used to go two times, but I can't do that anymore with 50 students". In one case, university supervisors were employed to do observations of student teachers. F6 questioned the ability to observe two times with 20 students when distances between field sites were large. F5 had six students enrolled and was able to observe students once per week as three of the students were placed in the same school. Faculty observed at a variety of times, some more formal, some more casual. M1 reported faculty intentionally observing students leading both

small group and large group activities. Two faculty utilized the CLASS assessment tool as they observed as a teaching tool for feedback rather than a score for students. F5 stated the CLASS tool provided a way to structure observation and a good support to say what faculty is looking for, for example: how students engage with children and plan. F6 relied on more formal observations from the mentor teacher, she used her observation time to check-in and see what was going on and how things were going. “I also want to observe them during free play. I want to see how they are in unstructured times to say, ‘What are you struggling with? Tell me what it is and let me know. I might have some ideas to help you’”.

Students perceived observations as a method for getting feedback, from both mentors and faculty, on their practice. S3 met with her mentor teacher after school, and talked about suggested changes after observations. S6 noted that her mentor observed more informally and give feedback in real time both asking questions and offering ideas. Her faculty supervisor had natural conversations like, “How is it going? What are you seeing? Do you have ideas?”. S1, said “I got great feedback from observations [from faculty], that was very helpful”. S5 appreciated information from her faculty observation such as, “... I noticed how some behaviors were happening or the strong relationship with the student you have been talking about”. In one case, faculty did not observe. A “university supervisor” was hired for observations. S3 noted the disconnection when the person observing was not a faculty member. She stated, “faculty did not observe...my university hired retired teachers for observations...she kept telling me like her whole life story l...I did not want to know that...I wanted to know how I did”.

Assignments and Feedback, Reflection, Meetings

A variety of additional intentional supports were noted as meaningful in field experiences; assignments and feedback on those assignments, reflection, and scheduled meetings with mentors and faculty. Some common assignments that were discussed were introduction letters to families, observations of children, child portfolios, creating a developmental profile of a focus child, small group and large group lesson plans and implementation, utilizing assessment tools and early learning standards, and finally, a week-long lesson plan. An example of the value for students is reflected by S5 who stated, “I built this curriculum unit and we used teaching standards, TS Gold and the early childhood standards...so I have experience with that”. Evaluations were also required assignments in most field experiences.

Reflection was used both as a practice and as an assignment mentioned by mentors, faculty and students. Several programs employed daily or weekly reflection journals. This enabled students to “think about all the components you need to consider when planning” (F5) and “build on student strengths, think a bit deeper, and expand their perspectives,” (F4). F4 considered reflection to be a key piece of practicum because you have to “Think about what you are doing and why you are doing it. What worked? What might you do differently? Hopefully they are getting into the habit of being reflective and that is something they will carry with them”. F5 said reading reflections helped her to learn more about their deep-thinking during student teaching experience and how students interpreted what was going on. She also viewed it as a way to build relationships with them when they talked about their reflection. S5 agreed, “they can read about our

experiences...ask us questions... we can reflect and go back and see what we wrote about”. M5 discussed how reflection helped students to focus discussions with faculty and get questions answered.

Feedback and opportunities to give feedback were perceived as important to the experience. Faculty reported giving feedback on assignments, weekly reflections, and observations. Mentors more often gave feedback to the student in real time or on the same day. M5 gave feedback such as “I really liked how you, during the free read aloud, used open ended questions” or if she observed that kids were getting restless, she observed, asked questions, and then gave some positive input on how they things were going. M6 gave feedback in real time after a de-escalation of children’s behavior stating, “That’s awesome, you did really good” and also gave different options on how the student can redirect children, while sharing what she would do in the situation, and reinforced that every day is different.

All mentors also reported filling out evaluation forms. Some completed them both during and at the end of the student teaching experience. M1 appreciated when the student teacher shared the faculty feedback on assignments with the mentor as it gave them additional perspective and content for discussion. Students appreciated feedback as a means to change practice and know how they were doing.

Formalized meetings were also employed as a student support with mentors, faculty and other students. Monthly or weekly group meetings of student teachers and faculty (or the university field experience coordinator) occurred in all situations either on campus or virtually. They were called practicum meetings or student teaching seminars.

This enabled students to talk to one another about their experiences and to allow for focused discussions of their learning. F3 mentioned, “We have discussions about what is happening in the field related to topics, for example, play...then they come back with what they have observed about play”. F5 described this support as processing what they were doing [in the field] and utilizing it inside of class.

Theme 4: Practicum Site Quality and Environmental Factors

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed characteristics of the practicum site and environment that were perceived as contributing to the quality of the field experience. Characteristics discussed included completing field experiences in their work sites or convenient locations, at programs/schools that followed developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), and in programs where the other people involved were supportive including directors/principals, classroom assistants and children.

Work Site and Convenience

Participants reported that there is often flexibility for students to select their own practicum site and when students choose the site where they work, there are many aspects that aid in their perception of quality of the field experience. One faculty reported that about 80% of their students complete their field experience where they work. F1 noted that one of the main benefits is employment, “People need to get paid, we don’t want people to lose jobs and insurance”. Three students described completing their student teaching in their workplace as helpful in “Maintaining a good-work life balance” (S1), not having to take off work (S3), being comfortable in the environment and the ease of having pre-existing relationships with staff and children (S1, S3, S6). S1 described that

she was able to complete her degree and work collaboratively which she felt made things easier. She considered this a “huge benefit”. S3 described that transitioning from an assisting role to the student teaching role in her workplace was challenging at first, but progressively got better as she realized she was able to do both at once. She said “It’s just like I got to switch my roles to helping each of the students...the teacher was helping me with ideas and how to make certain things better or how to help certain students do certain things”.

Convenience and familiarity with the site also aid in the perception of quality for both students and faculty. Faculty (F1, F4, F5) stated that they try to find sites for students that are convenient and in close proximity to the students’ home or the college/university. M1 and S4 talked about students’ familiarity with the school as a means of finding placement and feeling comfortable. Because students prefer proximity to their home, F6 discussed adapting to their needs by observing via Zoom when placements were out of travel proximity for faculty.

Developmentally Appropriate Environment and Group of Children

Faculty and students discussed the importance of a developmentally appropriate environment in their perceptions of quality field experiences. Two faculty discussed the environment and what the classroom looks and feels like. F2 and F5 expanded to the implementation of developmentally appropriate interactions, curriculum and practices. F2 stated, “I see a total focus on the children...and you knew they did that every day. Quality for me was very appropriate [interactions], developmentally, culturally, contextually”. F5 also expressed seeing developmentally appropriate practices in action,

“...all the ideas about learning through play... all the things I was trying to teach in the courses... individualization, social emotional development...how to handle behavior challenges... ways that curriculum was implemented”. This is also important for pre-service students to see. S5 noted, “They are learning so much through play, we are setting them up on the tables [activities] and they get to come explore... themselves”. S6 reflected that the practices implemented at placement sites matter, “A high-quality site based on child-centered best practice, NAEYC guidelines...finding places that are really doing really good things for kids and putting people in those places is gonna be how we have really quality educators”.

Director, Other Staff, and Children

Practicum sites not only include the mentor teacher, but also the director/principal, assistant teachers and the children in the classroom. Although not as widely discussed in interviews, these people are reported to impact the perception of quality of the field experience in a variety of ways. Participants discussed the importance of the support of the center director of the student teaching experience. F2 stated, “The director plays a huge role in the whole culture and temperature of the program” and discussed that it is critical that a director believes in education for their teachers. S4 also talked about the support from the school director as part of her perception of quality. Classroom assistant knowledge and experience can also be influential. M1 expressed, “I was lucky, my EA [educational assistant] she knew what to do, we have a really good routine and expectations in our room that we work really hard at”. This made it easier for the mentor to take on a student teacher, and enabled the student to focus on the children

in the classroom. F1 pointed out that when a classroom assistant doesn't know early childhood it can be challenging for the preservice students to manage another adult.

Related to the staff in the school and classroom, is the perception of feeling welcome in the setting. This was discussed by all members of the triad. F5 discussed that feeling welcome made a difference in her feelings about her own experience in the triad. M3 stated, "One thing that makes it high quality is that I am always open and welcoming and I love that they come in". M6 agreed and stated it was important to find people that welcome pre-service students and are excited to have them in the classroom. F6 expressed concern that when students don't feel welcome, it influences their participation and can lead to mentors believing the student lacks initiative. Feeling welcomed resulted in S5's statement, of feeling, "I'm not just ...a guest in the classroom...I'm part of the classroom".

The children in the classroom are often mentioned by students as the best part of the field experience. Participants also viewed children as a contributor to quality of the experience. When the group of children was considered "easy" both students and faculty thought the experience was better quality. S5 talked about the kids being "welcoming, great and knowing routines" which assisted the student teacher in carrying out required assignments. M1 noted that having easy classes [of children] enabled her to focus on the student teacher because "you don't have to worry about some of the other things".

Difficult to Find

Also related to practicum site characteristics, was the fact that it has become more challenging to find quality placement sites with the characteristics discussed above for

student teachers, and even more so in rural areas. This is recognized by both faculty and mentors. M5 recognized that is “becoming harder to find places for preschool student teachers to go”. F2 stated “When I was first a faculty member, we tended to have more options to place our students”. F4 discussed the difficulty in finding qualified mentor teachers to supervise students. Additional challenges emerged throughout interviews that are discussed in Theme 5.

Theme 5: Challenges and Barriers to High-Quality Experiences

Participants discussed and perceived that there are several challenges and barriers to creating high-quality field experiences in the research state. Several concerns and issues surfaced during interviews: time, mentor fixed mindset, issues inherent to the early childhood field in the research state such as professional standards and licensure, the differences between early childhood and K-12, and compensation for field experiences for students and mentors.

Time

The most mentioned issue, by fourteen participants, was time. Length of time in the experience and time for students and mentors/faculty to observe and connect were perceived as issues of concern. The length of time in field experiences varied, however, participants believed longer time in the field was needed to understand the full picture of being an early childhood teacher. F6 notes that with little early childhood focused time in the field, “It’s very difficult to teach relationship-based teaching as a core philosophy because they don’t have time in the field to make relationships with kids or cooperative teachers to even see...they don’t spend enough time to even know what that looks like”.

M5 states, “There are definite advantages to having longer experiences, in 4 weeks, to me, you don’t get to know the students [children] very well and families as well...there’s a lot that’s happening that you’re not seeing”. M4 “and then having her [the student teacher] here for a long time, a lot of hours and a lot of weeks was really good”. Students also believe that more time in the classroom, particularly for those who lack prior classroom experience is beneficial. S4 noted that giving students a chance to practice more would be ideal. S6 stated, “So maybe more time [in the classroom]...when you divide it up over a semester, it’s not very much time in a classroom...for someone who is outside that experience, I think more time would be good”.

Mentors and faculty perceived time to observe or meet with the student to be lacking and important. M1 discussed the value of time to sit with the student and connect as valuable and that due to schedules (both mentor and student), it was hard to find time to connect. F2 noticed, “I go to the program where the Director [serving as mentor] you know, barely has time to meet with them...How do we get buy in from the Director to say we want to provide time for this student to study...meet with their mentor?”. F4 stated, “I would say the thing that is lacking most is just enough time to feel like I have a good sense of it. I spend about an hour at each site visit, and I wish I could spend about four watching them”. F5 described attending to students in the field as one more thing on their plate, without time as a support. F6 suggested adding time dedicated to faculty workloads to be dedicated to student teachers.

Fixed Mindset

Another barrier perceived by faculty is a fixed mindset on behalf of the mentor teacher or director that disrupts the student's ability to apply new knowledge and practice during the field experience. F3 mentioned "rigid philosophical structures" that can be present in a classroom or a school. "They have this fixed mindset where they want to do exactly, and expect the student teacher to do the exact same thing...they are compelled to be inauthentic...to do what somebody else is doing". F3 also mentions that by doing this, the mentor is using a deficit lens, not recognizing that the student teacher has strengths that can enhance the quality of practice and the classroom. F4 stated "Oftentimes they [mentor teachers] are really good teachers but they're very set in how they want it done, to a T. The student wasn't able to try their own wings". F4 also mentioned working with a mentor teacher who would take over for the student, if they were not doing it the mentor's way which can cause students to be anxious, especially those who have not had much prior experience in the field. The fixed mindset can also be present site wide. F2 discusses the fact that "the director assigns them into the classrooms and doesn't really understand why this teacher [student] needs an education. Why do they need to learn more and not do exactly what we're already doing?".

State EC Issues

Some of the barriers and concerns perceived by participants are inherent within the constructs of licensure, standards, and the positionality of early childhood in the research state. Early childhood licensure can be obtained birth to third grade or as a pre-primary endorsement with a K-6 teaching license. A concern of participants in all three

roles is the vast difference between birth to third or sixth grade and the lack of preparation for students working with birth through age 5. M6 simply states, “Birth to third grade is a huge difference”. F5 and F6 discussed the only option in their program was for teachers to receive a K-6 license and add on the pre-primary endorsement. Placements can become problematic as field experience in the birth to age 5 is not extensive. F6 states “Before I came, it [the higher ed early childhood program] was reduced, like cut to the bone, and did not feel particularly intentional. It feels like the path of least resistance, like what’s the least we can do to get people this license?”. With the K-6 licensure many students “were having this elementary orientation...students don’t know child development. The practicum hours are very minimal so they had a pre-primary investment that only required 20 hours”. This becomes evident to students as they engaged in their field experience and student teaching. S3 states,

I feel like I was so under-prepared just because some of the classes I was taking at my university were mainly all about elementary education...it’s completely different. Like a whole different world...I don’t know anything about infants/toddlers besides the one class I took about infant-toddler. That’s it. Everything else was like in elementary or higher. I wish I had more classes for early learning and like the development, like DAP, and like how students are, these little ones, learning.

Faculty, in particular, perceive the state professional licensing board standards as a barrier. F3 mentions, “the standards bog us down...to check certain boxes...to go over the checklist...we constrict them [students] of their creativity...We have standards to

fulfill. We often put them in this box where they are. They are restricted from doing what they're very good at". F6 talks about the "bureaucratic dance that we have to do with our clinical office, relationships in the field and documenting for [state licensing board]" and doing all the things right as hindering progress with students and mentor teachers.

ECE Versus K-12

The licensure combination or endorsement heavily focused on the elementary years is noted by participants as problematic as early childhood pedagogy and practice differs from K-12 classrooms. M3 stated, "Not every classroom has a teacher standing in front, teaching all the kids the same thing at the same time". Early childhood education is more individualized to each child. M4 hoped that practicum students would have more early childhood background in coursework before entering her classroom for practicum,

Maybe some consideration of ...in a lot of ways, pre-k is just not like K-12. It really is significantly different...how we communicate with families...a huge amount of learning is social- emotional...they think of that as being non-academic when there really is a huge academic part of what we're doing...childhood as opposed to older K-12 stuff.

S3 noted coursework was more focused on elementary education and said, "This is not helping me, this is more towards elementary ed...none of the classes were related to early ed...this is not something I wanted to do but I stuck with it and passed all the class and passed through student teaching, even though none of the class was related to early learning."

Compensation

Another concern mentioned with field experience is compensation predominantly for students and mentors. F4 noted that not only do students not get paid during student teaching “they have to pay to take practicum”. Because students are not paid, some opt to student teach in their workplace which may impact the quality of the experience. F2 stated, “We can’t place students with no compensation. If they wouldn’t have to do it where they worked, and they would be paid for it...we could at least think about a better place for them”. Those students who are placed outside of their workplace, may experience challenges with balancing the need for money and completing practicum hours. M1 discussed a student in this situation, “She needed to go in and work and that would mess up her schedule...I get you need to make money but you need to focus on this program too”.

Five faculty participants discussed the problem of lack of compensation for mentor teachers. Mentor teachers are more commonly not compensated, and if they are compensated, payment is minimal. F6 pointed out, that the compensation is not equivalent to the work. “They do get a small stipend, and I mean small. I don’t know if they make 50 bucks from us and it’s a lot of work”. Faculty mentioned that quality of the field experience and investment of the mentor may be influenced by the lack of compensation. F2 acknowledged that “I think we would have better buy-in if there was something for them...we do nothing for them”.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the findings from my basic qualitative study exploring the perspectives of early childhood faculty, mentor teachers and preparation students. I provided an overview of the research design and summarized the findings from my study. First, the setting was described, including participant demographics. The procedures for data collection have been outlined including the number of participants as well as how and when the data was collected followed by a description of the data analysis process.

The research questions guiding this study were:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers and early childhood faculty regarding what constitutes quality field experiences?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers and early childhood faculty regarding what is most important to creating positive and quality field experiences?

Five themes emerged from the interviews conducted with participants: (a) communication, clear and common expectations and roles outside the triad, (b) mentor and faculty engagement, (c) student growth, motivation and individualized support, (d) practicum site quality and environmental factors and (e) challenges and barriers to high-quality experiences. The data related to field experiences was rich and complex. Participants also had recommendations to improve the quality of field experiences. Clear, consistent communication and shared expectations among students, mentors, and faculty were seen as essential to a high-quality field experience, with participants emphasizing the need for open dialogue, well-defined roles, and alignment across all parties. Gaps in

communication—especially between mentors and faculty—and unclear or mismatched expectations were identified as key areas for improvement, alongside the recognition of additional roles like placement coordinators and university supervisors.

The role of mentor teachers in shaping the field experience for student teachers was also evident. There was an emphasis on the need for proper training and compensation for mentors as many mentors feel unprepared and unsupported which can impact field experience quality. Relative to students, prior classroom experience, confidence, hand-on practice, and the process of reflection contribute to their perceptions of enhanced quality in their field experience. Practicum sites have implications for the participants' perceptions of quality within a field experience. Participants emphasized the importance of convenient locations, supportive staff, and developmentally appropriate practices, also noting that familiarity with the site and a welcoming atmosphere augment the overall quality of the experience. Participants identified several significant challenges in creating effective field experiences, including insufficient time for meaningful engagement, a fixed mindset among mentors that hinders student development, and systemic issues related to licensure and compensation. These barriers collectively impact the quality of training and preparation for early childhood educator. In Chapter 5, I will interpret both the findings and limitations of this study. I will discuss the implications of this study for future research and social change and finally, I will close with concluding statements regarding my study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of early childhood degree students, faculty, and mentor teachers on what constitutes a high-quality field experience and what components of the field experience are most important in creating a positive, high-quality field experience. This study was conducted due to limited focus in the literature related to high-quality field experiences for early childhood preparation students (La Paro et al., 2018; Matengu et al., 2021; Pihanpera et al., 2022; Scortescu & Sava, 2024; Sumrall et al., 2017). Literature reviews indicated that most of the research related to field experiences occurred between 2011 and 2019 with minimal research in the past five years (Matengu et al., 2021; Scortescu & Sava, 2024). It was imperative to explore field experiences and fill this gap in the literature. To do so, I conducted 16 semistructured interviews, on Zoom, with six faculty, five mentor teachers, and five students within a Midwest U.S. state. Five themes emerged from the data related to participants' perspectives: (a) communication, clear and common expectations, and roles outside the triad; (b) mentor and faculty engagement; (c) student growth, motivation, and individualized support; (d) practicum site quality and environmental factors; and (e) challenges and barriers to high-quality experiences. In Chapter 5, I interpret the findings from my data in relation to the theoretical framework and the recent literature. I also discuss the study's limitations and recommendations for future research, and implications for the field of early childhood education.

Interpretation of the Findings

The interpretation of the findings from this basic qualitative study was based on the data collected from 16 individual semistructured interviews, theoretical frameworks of Dewey and Vygostky, and the review of literature. The focus of my study was on two research questions:

RQ1: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty regarding what constitutes quality field experiences?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty regarding what is most important to creating positive and quality field experiences?

Theory and Connections

The theoretical foundations of this study were Dewey's (1938) quality of experiences in education and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory framed within NAEYC'S (2020a) *Professional Standards and Competencies*, Standard F. Dewey asserted that the quality within the educational experience is significant to learning and whether the learner found the experience to be agreeable (or not) has an effect on that learning. Dewey (1938, as cited in Pihanpera et al., 2022) thought students learn best through active experience or learning by "doing." For learning to have meaning and be useful, it should connect to past knowledge and experience. The educator is a guide who carefully designs experiences to meet the needs of the learner to encourage thought,

problem solving, and growth. When agreeable conditions are met, students reflect on their experiences to build understanding.

Vygotsky (1978, as cited in Stapleton & Stefaniak, 2019) emphasized the importance of social interactions and exploration through experiences that build on prior knowledge. Knowledge is constructed within the field experience triad through a social process between faculty, mentors and students in the creation of a shared knowledge base, developed through interaction with others, learning, scaffolding, and finally, applying knowledge in the classroom (Pihanpera et al., 2022, Sarvis & Silvers, 2019). Learning is not done independently, it happens and is shaped by others mediated by language, culture and relationships.

The exploration of the perspectives related to the quality of field experiences from the members of the field experience triad, yield support for the importance of both Dewey's and Vygotsky's assertions. Mentor teachers and faculty design and guide learning through a socially mediated process within the field experience. Each of the members of the triad help to shape the experience and impact the perception of quality. Throughout the interview process, evidence emerged of the importance of the mentor and faculty roles and characteristics within the triad that shaped positive experiences for students. Conversely, student behavior and engagement shaped the quality of the field experience for the educators. The following sections interpret the five themes emerging from perspectives of the field experience triad revealing what participants deemed as important to creating high-quality field experiences. Each theme is discussed in relation to the literature from the field and is followed by an overview of connections to theories.

Theme 1: Communication, Clear and Common Expectations, and Roles Outside the Triad

Relationships within the field experience triad have been noted in the literature as a critical component that can impact student learning (Curcio & Adams, 2019; La Paro et al., 2020; Yoon & Larkin, 2018). Delving into relationships, LaParo et al. (2020) found that two components of the perception of a ‘good fit’ in the relationship with mentor teachers were having similar goals and communication. Students reported higher satisfaction within their field experience when they perceived a “good fit” (LaParo et al., 2020). Thus, it is not surprising that communication emerged as the most discussed topic related to high-quality field experiences from the perspectives of students, mentor teachers and faculty in my study. Effective communication was identified by participants as a critical component of high-quality field experiences. Communication occurred through various channels, including emails, in-person discussions, and formal meetings. The most frequent and robust communication occurred between student and mentor teacher. Communication was utilized to determine students’ needs, problem solve, and share strategies. M5 noted that, “The ideal would be good communication between all 3 parties [mentor, faculty, student].” Similarly, Larkin (2018) found one of the components of uncovered tensions in the mentor/student relationship was communication which highlights the importance of establishing effective communication in a field experience. In my study, mentor and student participants expressed a desire for more frequent communication from faculty to ensure alignment of expectations and responsibilities.

When more communication and clear expectations were present in the field experience, participants perceived the quality to be higher.

Common Expectations

Participants emphasized the need for clear expectations among all parties involved—students, mentors, and faculty. All participants noted the existence of written expectations in the form of a manual, handbook, packet, or in some cases a website, outlining the field experience for students. Meetings were often used to set expectations, however, the expectations for the roles of mentors and faculty were often not as clear.

Issues and tensions have been noted within in the triad (Drewes et al., 2021; Yoon & Larkin, 2018). The clarity of roles and expectations were seen by participants as an essential element of the quality of field experiences. When a mismatch of expectations occurred, there was frustration and tension. Participants in all three roles in the triad, noted they perceived higher quality in the field experience when everyone had common expectations that were clearly communicated. Similarly, Katz & Isik-Ercan (2015) proposed a common lingua-culture as an important consideration to establish this clarity in field experiences. This involves developing common understanding, language, and terminology surrounding the field experience for all members of the triad. When a shared lingua-culture is present, there is less opportunity for discrepancy of expectations.

Roles Outside the Triad

The field experience triad is the traditional model most often utilized and discussed in the literature (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Lafferty, 2018; La Paro et al., 2018, 2020; Stapleton et al., 2021; Van Schagen Johnson et al., 2016). In my study, two

additional roles materialized in the discussions with participants at some universities; field experience coordinators and university supervising teachers. The perception of value of the positions varied based on participant. Field experience coordinators were a role described in three of the settings. In two settings, faculty appreciated this role as supporting the field experience. In the other, faculty perceived the position as “getting in the way” of making good placements. The other position mentioned in interviews from one setting is a “university supervising teacher” who observes and mentors the student, on behalf of the university, in place of faculty. In this case, the supervisor was a retired teacher not familiar with university coursework. The student in this setting found this experience to be negative as the university supervisor was not useful in giving expectations nor helpful feedback. Hart (2020) underscored that the roles and responsibilities of mentors and faculty are often unclear and confusing. Drewes et al. (2021) asserts that members of the field experience triad need to function as an instructional team in their practice with students. Additional roles may have contributed to tension or role confusion influencing the varying perceptions of the value of those roles to participants.

Theme 2: Mentor and Faculty Engagement

Mentor teachers have been cited as one of the most influential actors in early childhood teacher preparation (Lafferty, 2018) as their role is important to the development of preparation students (S. Kim et al., 2024). Mentors contribute to a student’s learning to teach (Dewhurst et al., 2020; Doran, 2020), their teaching self-efficacy (Alford & Winters, 2025; Johnson et al., 2017), professional identity, and

commitment to the profession (La Paro et al., 2018). Comparably, participants in this study, deemed the role of mentor teachers as vital in shaping the quality of student teaching experiences. Faculty and mentor participants agreed that the mentors are expected to model best practices, provide guidance, and support student teachers. Research has cited similar essential elements of being a mentor as being a positive role model, giving common expectations and feedback, (Dunst et al, 2020; Scortescu & Sava, 2024)), and emotional scaffolding of students during the field experience (Lees & Kennedy, 2017).

In the literature, it is well documented that challenges existed in finding experienced and trained mentor teachers for this important role. Many programs continue to struggle with finding experienced mentors with sufficient training that is aligned with preparation coursework and best practice (Doran, 2020). Participants in the current study reported both a lack of training and compensation for mentor teacher roles as problematic. Faculty reported that mentors either have had no training, or only participated in a short on-line training video. Mentors expressed a desire for training for things such as directing/guiding student teachers, giving feedback, and assessing and documenting student teacher progress. This concurs with research that most often suggests that to improve mentor teacher quality training and professional development is needed (Drewes et al., 2021; Kennedy and Lees, 2017; Lafferty, 2018; Sumrall et al., 2017).

Motivation for Mentors

Without training and compensation, why do mentors take on student teachers in their classrooms? Mentor perspectives are limited in the literature. However, cooperating teachers were found to view mentorship as an opportunity to pass on knowledge and experience, and part of their professional role (Lees & Kennedy, 2017). They may also be interested in learning new content, strengthening their own competency in teaching, maintaining connection to the university they attended or as a feeling of obligation to contribute to the early childhood field by mentoring others (Puroila, 2021). Mentor participants in my study acknowledged similar motivations; improving their own quality, pride in being a graduate of the same university, sharing knowledge, and contributing to the field.

In addition, they reported, wanting to “feel seen” as a professional and for the important work of the early childhood field. Mentors appreciated faculty acknowledgement of their good work and felt validated in their work as professionals. They also mentioned wanting others to see what they do in their classrooms, as others do not often see what happens in their classrooms nor understand the importance of early childhood education. Sharing the need for quality early childhood professionals and the value of the early childhood field was perceived by mentor participants as contributing to the field.

Having students in the classroom and in helping prepare the next generation of early childhood teachers inspired mentors in their own roles. M1 also mentioned it felt her hone in on what she is doing each day and stated that it made her feel “a little bit

more on top of my game...I also think it is higher quality because I have a bit more focus on what I am actually doing instead of just autopilot...I had to show her how to actually do the job.” Sharing her practice helped her to feel more connected to her own work.

Mentors were also motivated by student growth and development while in their classrooms and viewed student teachers using things that had learned from their mentor in their own practice and life as rewarding.

Recommendations for Mentoring

As stated, training and professional development of mentors has been cited throughout research as needed to increase mentor quality (Drewes et al., 2021; Kennedy and Lees, 2017; Lafferty, 2018; S. Kim et al., 2024; Sumrall et al., 2017). NAEYC Standard F: Field Experience Quality in the cooperating/mentor/supervisor teacher quality category (NAEYC, 2021a) also indicated IHE’s must have a plan for selecting, have training and orientation for, support for, and provide regular feedback to mentors. Lafferty (2018) found that when training was provided for mentors, they engaged in more reflective practices and higher quality practices. Without training, researchers concluded it was likely mentors drew from their own experiences as students in preparation programs (John et al., 2024; Robey & Krause, 2024). Moloney & Pope (2025) found implementation of a 14-week, online mentoring program to increase mentor’s knowledge of their role and processes of mentoring, skills as a mentor, active listening, as well, as satisfaction and pride in their professional practice. Participants also shared ideas for improving practices for mentor teachers. Faculty and mentor participants agreed that training for working with students is needed and should include content

specific to coaching and mentoring early childhood students. Faculty noted content ought to include modeling developmentally appropriate content and experiences, how to work with adult learners, how to coach and give feedback. The 11 teacher educator roles outlined in research by Robey & Krause (2024) would provide a solution to clarifying expectations and a beginning to professional development around mentoring. Other ideas emerged from individual faculty participants such as topics that include modeling developmentally appropriate practice and supporting students in practice with children that they have learned throughout their coursework such as: behavior guidance, learning through play, and individualization. A faculty member also suggested that mentors need to know how to help students achieve goals while maintaining flexibility in how students get there.

A perspective from students, faculty and mentor participants that was notable from the interviews, was that cooperating teachers should be someone who *wants* to be a mentor and is *accepting* of a student teacher in their classroom. They also suggested the mentor needs to be at a place in their career where they feel ready to teach adults. F6 stated they have to have the mindset to be ready to mentor the next generation, “I’m ready to do this, I’m ready to teach adults. That makes a huge difference to want the student and have the skills to help them.” F1 suggested an assessment tool to assess if the person was a good mentor and if not, what areas of professional development was needed so that training could address that in the future. F6 discussed a community-based model where the university worked to address early childhood training needs in the community while simultaneously preparing mentors. Finally, all faculty said that mentors should be

compensated for their work with students which correlates with recommendations from the field (Lees & Kennedy, 2017).

Faculty Characteristics

Faculty have been noted to hold their role primarily in the context of the college or university setting where they impart knowledge, theory and pedagogy and then supervise field experiences (Burroughs et al., 2020; Isik-Ercan et al., 2017). Faculty were otherwise noted to organize particulars of the practicum such as placements, meetings and not expected to substantially contribute to the field experience (Mykkanen et al., 2022). Otherwise, in the review of literature, there was little to no mention of faculty separate from the other members of the triad as they are cited to be rarely the focus of studies with much remaining to be known related to their role and impact on student learning (Scortescu & Sava, 2024). Similarly, faculty were the least discussed member of the field experience resulting in less than 50 quotations throughout the 16 interviews. Some participants concurred with the insignificance of the faculty role, while others noted their importance in providing support, consultation, conflict resolution, and resources. Students valued faculty knowledge of early childhood, feedback on assignments and lesson plans, and support. One student interviewed discussed continuing to be connected to her faculty from her school utilizing her as a community resource. One faculty noted that due to the experience in coursework with students, they have a unique perspective of that student. She stated that as a faculty, “You know more about the student teacher, where they are and how to scaffold their learning.” This provides a

window of opportunity that is not often mentioned in the literature and is only possessed by faculty.

Faculty satisfaction, Motivation, and Engagement

Faculty members derived satisfaction from their roles in field experiences through problem-solving, witnessing student growth, and contributing to the early childhood profession. These are important contributions in consideration of how faculty perceive quality of their own experience within the field experience triad. In fact, five faculty specifically mentioned problem-solving with students and mentors as part of their perception of quality of their own experience as it makes it more interesting and challenging. F6 appreciated when students show, “I trust you enough to come in and be vulnerable enough so that I’m asking you to come in when I’m struggling with something.” Students also valued faculty expertise in problem-solving.

Faculty viewed the success and growth of their students as integral to enhancing the quality of their own experiences. They expressed excitement when students demonstrate competence in their teaching and apply their knowledge in real classroom setting, noting that successful interactions among mentors, students, and children lead to rewarding experiences. Faculty members emphasized the reciprocal nature of learning during field experiences, where faculty also gained insights from students, children and the classroom environment. “I feel we all learn from each other,” F3. In addition, being out in the field, seeing children, different classroom and meeting a variety of mentor teachers was part of the quality of faculty experience.

Engagement among faculty, mentors, and student teachers is highlighted as essential for a high-quality field experience. Mentor participants advocate for more communication and collaboration with faculty to ensure that the field experience is going well. M5 suggested that for herself and faculty, “High quality is this: the engagement of everybody.” Similarly, Yoon & Larkin (2018) advocated for improved relationships between faculty and mentor teachers where ongoing and substantive communication would occur regularly.

Theme 3: Student Growth, Motivation, and Individualized Support

The field experience in early childhood preparation programs provides an opportunity to ensure students can apply their knowledge and put it into practice before entering the profession. Literature examined in the field identified a variety of aspects of the field experience and its’ contribution to student growth and development and perceptions of themselves as they enter the field of early childhood education. Practice-based experiences contribute to students’ foundational knowledge, developmentally appropriate practice, skills in observation and assessment and reflective practice, and overall readiness for the field (Brown et al., 2017). As students are in the process of applying the skills learned from their coursework in practicum settings, their overall satisfaction in their field experience was found to be highly correlated with their self-efficacy (Alford & Winters, 2025; Johnson et al., 2017; La Paro & Siskind, 2022; Singh, 2017). In addition, students developed professionalism (Guevara, 2020) and a sense of belonging to the early childhood profession (Dewhurst et al., 2020). Little has been explored related to perspectives of what creates a high- quality practice-based experience.

The most commonly discussed characteristic of students, discussed by participants in my study, that contributed to the quality of the field experience was a student's prior experience in early childhood classrooms with young children. This was not mentioned in the literature reviewed but noted as an important factor by participants from three roles in the triad. Faculty and mentors noted that students who have experience, are more apt to "jump in" and tend to do well student teaching. M5 noted that those students who had prior experience had more realistic expectations, more engagement and a greater comfort level. Student participants also perceived prior experience with children as an asset to their student teaching. A sentiment expressed by S1 that summarized several student comments was, "I was able to take my prior knowledge and experience and implement that into practicum- that was like a foundation for being successful." More recent research has acknowledged the impact of prior work experience recognizing that this gives students different "starting points", needs, and expectations in a practicum setting (Mykkanen et al., 2022).

Potentially related to past experience, is student confidence. Literature reviewed addressed self-efficacy or belief in oneself as a result of student teaching (Johnson et al., 2017; LaParo & Siskind, 2022; Singh, 2017). LaParo & Siskind (2022) noted correlations between satisfaction and teaching efficacy and levels of confidence for students who participated in a preschool and kindergarten field experience. My study's participants discussed confidence within student teaching as an aspect contributing to the quality of the field experience for the participants. Mentor teachers discussed student confidence as beneficial to both the student and the mentor as it enables students to interact and take on

roles more quickly in the classroom. When they lack confidence, students sit back and observe and are not actively involved. One mentor noticed that in an experience where students came in pairs, they were more confident and relaxed. The peer coaching model (Loman et al., 2020) implemented student pairs where students take a more active role working together in a field experience. F4 discussed lack of experience in classrooms contributing to lack of confidence and the danger of self-fulfilling prophecy for students. She also stated that confidence needed to be nurtured and students needed reminders that it is ok to make mistakes. Students discussed mentor teachers as being instrumental in building students' confidence. Giving responsibility and independence to try new things helped students to feel like the mentor trusted them which in turn, contributed to their confidence.

Singh (2017) discussed that participation in practice-based experiences helped students to reduce anxiety about teaching and boost confidence (LaParo & Siskind, 2022) as students become aware of strengths and limitations and the reality of classrooms. This finding held true in my study as mentor, faculty and student participants noted that recognizing student knowledge and strengths added to the quality of the field experience. F3 discussed recognition of student capabilities and knowledge from not only coursework, but from their cultural heritage and experiences in their communities. Identifying and accepting their assets enables both the faculty and students to use those strengths in the field experience making it more satisfying for all. On the receiving side, student participants agreed. S1 stated that she returned to school later in life, and appreciated that her knowledge and experience were valued in her practicum experience.

The field experience has been documented as a critical component of preparation where students bridge knowledge to practice (NAEYC, 2021a; Ribaeus et al., 2022; H. Taylor et al., 2021). The hands-on application of knowledge in real classrooms with children and families was discussed by student participants as a significant factor in their perception of a high-quality practice-based experience. Both applying learning from their studies and the ability to develop their own practice during student teaching was perceived by students as contributing to the value of the experience. Each student interviewed described facets of learning and satisfaction from these real-world experiences. Paramount to all others was learning *with, about* and *from* the children. Students found value in, as S5 stated, “helping children learn and seeing learning in progress” which they noted as being a part of quality in the experience. Notably, the making sense of their coursework through hands on practice also contributed to student perspectives of quality. S4 noted, “We are learning and practicing at the same time and it makes more sense...then we also reflect—we can think about it...we can problem solve.” This is in congruence with researchers who have noted that as students apply coursework in practicum settings overall satisfaction of their experience was highly correlated with self-efficacy (Alford & Winters, 2025; Johnson et al., 2017; La Paro & Siskind, 2022). This satisfaction and belief in oneself due to applying knowledge to practice in fieldwork enlightens the student perception of quality.

Student Supports

NAEYC Standard F: Field Experience Quality discusses preparation for field experiences, sequencing of the field experience, and supports for the candidate. Supports

include clear expectations of growth in competency, behavioral alignment to the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, preparation for, and ongoing feedback throughout the experience in the field (NAEYC, 2021a). Participants in this study discussed similar topics such as preparation and sequencing for/of the experience, observations, feedback and reflection. Adherence to the Code of Ethical Conduct was not mentioned by participants.

Singh (2017) and S. Kim et al. (2024), discussed the variability in practice-based experiences. Variables can include design, implementation, place in coursework, feedback, learning activities and more. Likewise, study participants noted differences in lengths of time of and number of days per week of their experiences ranging from 4-15 weeks and 1-5 days per week. The total of 120 hours was consistently noted for time in the field. Longer periods of time in the classroom, as well as more days per week, were recommended by participants.

Participants confirmed the sequencing of the field experience followed the same progression in each situation; observation, supporting the mentor teacher, helping with activities, leading small and large groups and gradually assuming full responsibility of the classroom. The pacing of the sequence was dependent on the number of weeks, student prior experience and comfort level. Mentors discussed starting slowly, particularly in the first week.

Problem solving, observation, feedback and reflection were other supports mentioned by students, mentors, and faculty. One issue that required problem solving was the discrepancy between what was learned in coursework versus practice in a

classroom. M6 stated, “I learned this in school, but you guys are doing it this way [students say]...well, yeah, because that is what actually works.” This is similar to Botha and Baxen’s (2018) findings that students often felt reality was far from the ideal. Support in field experiences is necessary to bridge the gap between actual and ideal.

Both mentors and faculty consider observation to be a component of support during the field experience. Mentors used more informal observation on a daily basis. Faculty used informal and formal observation. Most faculty observed 2 times during a student teaching experience. F6 relied on observations from the mentor teacher and used her classroom visits as a “check-in” with the student and mentor. Others used formal assessment tools as a means of structuring the observation and giving student feedback. Students perceived observation as a means of receiving feedback on their practice.

Giving and receiving feedback was an important aspect of support and quality from the perspective of students, mentors and faculty. Mykkanen et al. (2022) also found feedback to be a factor in students’ perception of a successful practicum. Bauml & Kyzar (2025) found that feedback on assignments, lessons plans and instruction and students’ perception of support from mentors, faculty and other students were named as the two specific components of coursework and field experiences that contributed to students’ self-efficacy. In my study, mentors and faculty said they gave feedback in real-time, through joint meetings, and also through evaluation forms. Students valued feedback as a means to change practice and know how they were doing. S3 mentioned her dissatisfaction of not receiving feedback from her observation from a university supervisor

who was not a faculty member. She stated, “She kept telling me her whole life story...I did not want to know that, I wanted to know how I did.”

Reflective practice was noted as a key element to be learned through field experiences (Brown, et. al., 2017; Purcell & Schmitt, 2023). When aligned with preparation standards, reflection can assist in not only tracking student growth in practice and preparation, but can be used for continuous improvement of the preparation program and experiences in the field (Purcell & Schmitt, 2023). Reflective practice also had a positive effect on student beliefs and dispositions (Loman et al., 2020). In my study, reflection was used both as a practice and assignment that was mentioned by all three members of the triad. Several programs utilized daily or weekly reflection journals. This enabled students to “think about all the components you need to consider when planning” (F5) and “build on student strengths, think a bit deeper, and expand their perspectives”, (F4). Both students and faculty viewed writing and reading reflections as a way to learn more about what students were thinking and how they were interpreting what was happening in the field experience. Reflection was also employed during practicum meetings where students processed what they were doing in the field through discussion and reflection with others.

Theme 4: Practicum Site Quality and Environmental Factors

The quality of practicum sites significantly impacts the field experience according to participants. Finding settings and exemplar programs that provide students models of quality early childhood practice with the support of experienced mentors has been noted as problematic (Aspden & McLachlan, 2017; Doran, 2020). Within the quality of the

field experience category of NAEYC Standard F: Field Experience Quality (NAEYC, 2021a) it is stated that institutions must have intentional partnerships with field experience sites that include criteria/expectations for selection of the site, how the site, program and candidates will work together, a plan and sequence to support preparation, student growth in competency and alignment of practice with the *NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies*. The standard addresses the partnership and agreements that should occur between the higher education program and the practice site.

However, my study's participants had additional thoughts about practicum sites that contributed to the quality from their perspective. Characteristics discussed included completing field experiences in their work sites or convenient locations, at programs/schools that followed developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), and in programs where the other people involved were supportive including directors/principals, classroom assistants and children. Students often preferred to complete their field experiences at their workplaces, which facilitated a better work-life balance, comfort in the environment and remain employed as they complete their field work. This was described by students as a "huge benefit". Convenience and familiarity with the site, even if not their workplace, were also perceived as beneficial aspects by both students and faculty. Students preferred proximity to their place of residence. John et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of this "fit" or "match" in their examination of practices for student placements. Listening to the preferences of students, like those noted in my study, is an additional component of quality to consider.

Both students and faculty considered developmentally appropriate practice in their perspective of high quality including the environment, interactions, curriculum and practices. Faculty desired classrooms where their students could see the things that were taught in courses, implemented on a daily basis. S6 reflected and suggested that the practices implemented at placement sites matter, “A high-quality site based on child-centered best practice, NAEYC guidelines...finding places that are really doing really good things for kids and putting people in those places is gonna be how we have really quality educators.” This is in alignment with recommendations from Alford & Winters (2025) who note “the quality and quantity of time preservice teachers (PST) spend in excellent classrooms spaces could ensure PST’s gain much needed experiences to improve their efficacy levels.” They also caution against PST observing/practicing in classrooms with inadequate classroom management and negative schools and classrooms as these elements can be harmful to student self-efficacy.

The NAEYC Field Experience Standard F denoted the ways that the preparation program and field experience site should work together (NAEYC, 2021a). What is not mentioned in the standard and had more limited discussion in the interviews with participants, were other people outside the field experience triad at the site. Yet, others impacted perceptions of quality including directors, other classroom staff, and the children. Comments from participants in all 3 roles were made related to the importance of a supportive director, who believes in education for teachers, to the quality of the experience. Mentors and faculty discussed the classroom assistant role and their influence on quality. Sometimes assistants were also good models of appropriate practice and

helped the classroom to run smoothly which made it easier for both the mentor and student to focus on what is happening in the classroom. The children were frequently mentioned by students as the “best part” of the field experience particularly when the group of children were considered to be “easy.” This also impacted mentor perceptions of quality as they could more readily focus on working with the student teacher when challenges with children were not a worry.

Finally, when directors, support staff, and children are perceived as welcoming, all 3 members of the triad are more apt to deem the experience as high quality. M6 stated it was essential to find mentors who welcome student teachers and are excited to have them in the classroom. Conversely, faculty shared that when students don’t feel welcome it influenced their participation in the experience. A culminating comment from a student that illustrated this point was “I am not just...a guest in the classroom...I’m part of the classroom.” A sense of belonging was derived from a welcoming environment. Similarly, practice in the field has been found to not only impact student teachers’ sense of belonging in the practicum (or not) but also to the teaching profession. It can also be a determining factor in committing to or leaving the program of study (Dewhurst et al., 2020).

Theme 5: Challenges and Barriers to High-Quality Experiences

A disconnect was identified as existing between the quality of field experiences and early childhood teacher preparation programs (Burroughs et al., 2020). Additionally, issues (Drewes et al., 2021) and tensions (Yoon & Larkin, 2018) have been found to be present within the field experience triad. Participants agreed there are numerous

challenges and barriers that hinder high-quality field experiences in the research state. Issues that were presented as impeding quality were: time, fixed mindset of mentors, issues intrinsic in the research state such as professional standards and licensure, differences in approach and practice between early childhood and K-12, and compensation for field experiences for both students and mentor teachers.

Time was mentioned as a critical issue by 14 participants, with many feeling that longer field experiences would allow for relationship-building amongst triad members and deeper learning of the realities of what it means to be a teacher of young children. Furthermore, mentors and faculty desired more time to meet the goals of the field experience such as observation, evaluation and connecting with the student and other members in the triad.

Mentor fixed mindset was an obstacle touched on by several faculty. A mentor's "rigid philosophical structures," inflexibility, and resistance to change prevents students from applying their knowledge and practice in field experiences. F4 stated, "Oftentimes the [mentor teachers] are really good teachers but they're very set in how they want it done, to a tee. The student wasn't able to try their own wings". This was said to cause students to be anxious and afraid to try new things.

State EC Issues

Some concerns and barriers were thought to be embedded with the state constructs. These issues included professional licensure, standards, how early childhood is positioned within the state and compensation. A concern of participants in all three roles is the existence of the birth to third grade licensure and pre-primary endorsement

that can be paired with K-6 licensure. M6 stated, “Birth to third grade is a huge difference!” Concerns of participants are regarding the differences in knowledge and pedagogy and preparation for students working with birth through age 5. This was highlighted by S3’s comments about feeling under-prepared as she felt her classes were focused on elementary education. She stated “It’s completely different. Like a whole different world...I don’t know anything about infants and toddlers besides the one class I took...That’s it...I wish I had more classes for early learning and development, like DAP, and like how students, are, these little ones, learning.”

Faculty considered state standards and regulations to be restricting. Likewise, standards have been cited as hindering the field experience. Drewes et al., (2021) posited that standards act as barriers to fulfilling the learning process in field experiences. Faculty participants agreed. Comments such as “standards bog us down...to check certain boxes” and that they “hinder the progress with students and mentor teachers” and “constrict students” highlight the sentiments of faculty related to standards. In addition, assessments used in student teaching often are daunting and create a dichotomy. The EDTPA is used in the research state. The duality of its use as a tool for growth but also the ultimate determination of licensure (Auslander et al., 2021) is what is noted as a concern for faculty.

Finally, compensation for students and mentors was not prevalent within the state. Students are not paid during student teaching which can impact students financially. F4 remarked, “they have to pay to take practicum”. Because of the lack of pay, many students advocate for field experiences in their workplace which may be lacking in

quality. Five faculty ascertained the need for compensation for mentors. Faculty stated that the quality of the field experience and investment of the mentor was at stake due to this lack of compensation.

The five themes identified in my study collectively illustrated the complexities of field experiences in early childhood. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Dewey's quality of experiences and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the findings highlight the significance of social interactions and the active engagement of all parties involved in the learning process. Dewey (1938) contends that the educator must arrange for the content, interactions, and the environment to meet the needs and abilities of the learner within circumstances that provide value and significance as part of the process of education. Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) asserts that knowledge is constructed through social interactions, exploration and experiences that build on one's prior knowledge.

Through examination of the five themes collected from the data, several elements become clear. The social interactions/communication and active involvement of all three members of the triad were noted as contributing to the quality of the learning process. Effective communication among students, mentors, and faculty is crucial for establishing clear expectations and roles, which significantly impacts the perceived quality of field experiences. The active involvement of mentor teachers and faculty in modeling best practice and providing guidance in students' learning is vital in shaping the quality of student teaching experiences. Students learned from questions, conversation, feedback, and reflection with mentors and faculty. In agreement with Dewey and Vygotsky, students' prior experiences matter. Their coursework and previous experience with

children in early childhood setting provide opportunities to build from existing knowledge and experience which enables them to actively engage in classrooms and feel more confident in their student teaching.

Field experiences are essential for student development, allowing them to apply their knowledge in practice, which enhances their self-efficacy (Alford & Winters, 2025; Johnson, 2017, La Paro & Siskind, 2022), readiness for the profession, and commitment to the profession (Heinz, 2024; La Paro et al. 2018). The characteristics of practicum sites, including the support from staff and the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices, play a significant role in the quality of field experiences. Various challenges, such as time constraints, fixed mindsets of mentors, and issues related to state standards and compensation, hinder the quality of field experiences.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the study. First, the interview sample is limited in size to 16 participants. It is also limited to perspectives within the research state. Although there were colleges and university participants from various locations in the state reflecting both urban and rural locations, data may not be representative of perspectives of faculty, mentor teachers, or students throughout the state or across the United States. Second, the interviews were conducted by Zoom. While Zoom has the benefit of convenience, the asset of interviews being relational was limited through the use of a screen versus in person engagement. There were two interviews where internet connections were interrupted temporarily. In one instance, the participant was out of the

country, in another, there was a storm that affected the connection. Through collaborative problem solving and switching to audio only, both interviews were completed.

Researcher bias was also a potential limitation. My involvement and position in the field of early childhood has provided me with knowledge and background related to field experiences and I hold deep-rooted professional beliefs about the importance of those experiences. To combat bias, I employed several strategies. I followed the interview protocol and prompts. I asked open-ended questions allowing for participants to give their perspectives. All participants were sent a summary of research findings to check for accuracy of their perspective and given the opportunity to provide feedback or additional information. Participants did not add more information but several thanked me for the opportunity to talk about their experiences. I engaged in dialogue with colleagues involved in research from both early childhood and other disciplines to keep bias in check throughout research and data analysis. I also included a content expert reviewer who conducted a review of my findings and checked for bias. Finally, I recorded personal reflections throughout the study, particularly through the interview and data analysis as a means of controlling for bias.

Recommendations

My study provides a step toward better understanding the perspectives of faculty, mentors and students related to high-quality field experiences. In agreement with Hart (2020), there are too many components of field experiences that are, in essence, “left to chance”. More research and intentionality regarding high quality field experiences needs continued examination. Given my study's results and limitations, my first

recommendation is to replicate the study with other institutions of higher education (IHEs) in the research state to broaden the perspectives within and amongst triads across the state. Secondly, I recommend replicating the study in other states throughout the country. State specific research can provide information relative to the unique perspectives and needs in geographic areas related to quality field experiences which can be addressed by individual universities or by state departments of education. My third recommendation is for researchers to conduct a mixed-methods study garnering additional information from the results of the current study. Researchers can then examine the agreement or disagreement of the components that emerged that were perceived as impacting the quality of field experiences, as well as, deeper exploration through qualitative discussion utilizing focus groups or interviews. Due to the emphasis on effective and clear communication from participants as a critical component of high-quality field experiences, I recommend further exploration of this topic to examine models of communications, such as establishing lingua-culture (Katz & Isik-Ercan, 2015), that could best be employed within triads.

Training and professional development of mentors has been specified throughout research as needed to increase mentor quality (Drewes et al., 2021; Kennedy and Lees, 2017; Lafferty, 2018; Sumrall et al., 2017, S. Kim et al., 2024)). NAEYC Standard F: Field Experience Quality in the cooperating/mentor/supervisor teacher quality category (NAEYC 2021a) details a plan for selecting, have training, orientation, support, and regular feedback for mentors. An introduction to the Clark and colleagues' 11 identified teacher educator roles (Robey & Krause, 2024) could provide an excellent basis for

training. Another option is the implementation of the professional development school model (Hilaski et al., 2021) which provides opportunities for continued and collaborative learning for all members of the triad.

As there is very little known related to the faculty role, influence on the other members of the triad, and the quality of the field experience (Scortescu & Sava, 2024) this is another area for researcher exploration. Finally, my last recommendation is to explore funding sources for compensation, training, and support for mentors within the research state because of their significance in the development of preparation students (S. Kim et al., 2024).

Implications

The results of my study have the potential to effect positive social change in the field of early childhood educator preparation in a number of ways. First, the results contribute to the literature filling the gap related to the quality of field experiences by providing additional understanding of what constitutes high-quality field experiences and the components important to creating high-quality field experiences from the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty in the research state. The quality and quantity of time preservice teachers spend in positive field experiences matter (Alford & Winters, 2025). Second, there is a priority in the research state to provide guidance for high-quality field experiences and expand access to those experiences (Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018; Hewitt & Harney, 2019). Singh (2017) and S. Kim et al., (2024) noted that variability exists in many aspects of the field experience urges efforts to work toward commonality. The results of this study may

contribute to the creation of guidance documents for field experiences within the state. In turn, that could help to establish implementation of components of the field experiences that are perceived as contributing to quality as well as assist application of consistent practice of those elements.

Informing the quality of field experiences of degree students may lead to a better prepared early childhood workforce and retention in the field. Researchers have examined student teachers' perceptions of various aspects of field experience, including their readiness for teaching (Brown et al., 2017; Dewhurst et al., 2020; J. Kim, 2020; Yoon & Larkin, 2018), transition to teaching (Garza et al., 2016), and self-efficacy (Johnson et al., 2017; La Paro & Siskind, 2022). Research has also found practice-based experience is an important component of the identity formation of early childhood preservice teachers sense of belonging (Dewhurst et al., 2020) and commitment to the profession (La Paro et al., 2018). This is significant, particularly, in the critical first three years of teaching. Better prepared teachers who remain in the field may lead to increased quality in early childhood classrooms for young children (Boyd et al., 2020). Lastly, high-quality early childhood classrooms and programs have been known to reduce, minimize, and prevent achievement gaps prior to kindergarten entry (Morgan, 2019). Research results indicate that early childhood preparation graduates show more initiative and awareness of children's learning (Fairchild et al., 2022) which impacted their likelihood of implementation of high-quality practice and pedagogical quality (Mikuska et al.; 2025) and ability to narrow gaps in learning to benefit all children (Fairchild et al., 2022). Children who have experienced a high level of quality in early education and care

settings demonstrated improved outcomes for later academic success (Robinson et al., 2021).

Conclusion

This study was prompted by the gap in literature related to high-quality field experiences in early childhood and the call to strengthen those experiences both in the research state and nationally (CAEP, 2022; Early Childhood Workforce Minnesota, 2018; Hewitt & Harney, 2019; Moses & Harrill, 2022; NAEYC, 2020b). It had been noted, in the research state, that faculty describe challenges in finding and accessing high-quality field placements resulting in ineffective learning for early childhood preparation students and the potential for negative outcomes for children (Hewitt & Harney, 2019). In this basic qualitative study, I explored the perspectives of early childhood preparation students, mentors, and faculty on what constitutes a quality field experience and what components of that experience are most important. Through interviewing 16 participants, 5 themes surfaced from the data: (a) communication, clear and common expectations and roles outside the triad, (b) mentor and faculty engagement, (c) student growth, motivation and individualized support, (d) practicum site quality and environmental factors and (e) challenges and barriers to high-quality experiences. These findings fill a gap in the literature related to high-quality field experiences by contributing to greater understanding of the perspectives of the field experience triad and what they view as most important in a quality field experience and continue to warrant exploration and action.

I recommend continued research, both within the state and nationally, to explore varying perspectives of the field experience triad in other locales. To further investigate, mixed-methods approaches could reveal depth of knowledge related to participants' perspectives. Examination of communication strategies is recommended due to perceived importance of communication in a field experience. Finally, training support, and compensation for mentors and compensation for students should be further explored. The findings of this study have the potential to impact social change by contributing to the literature related to perspectives of quality field experiences on behalf of students, mentors and faculty. This data can provide direction in the research state for development of guidance documents and consistency in practice to increase the quality of field experiences. In turn, those quality practice-based experiences can increase the preparation students' sense of belong in the field (Dewhurst et al., 2020) and commitment to the profession (La Paro et al., 2018).

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol Student

RQ1: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty on what constitutes a quality field experience?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty on what components of the field experience are most important to creating a positive, quality field experience for those involved?

Introduction (Script)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. To assist in note-taking, I will be recording our discussion today. I will be the only researcher that will have access to the recordings unless requested by Walden University. Recordings will be kept on a password protected account for five years after they are transcribed. The release form you have signed states that 1) all information shared will be held confidential, and 2) your participation in this study is voluntary and you may leave the study at any point.

I planned this interview to last approximately 45-60 minutes. During this time, I have about 14 questions that I would like to cover. If we seem to be running short on time, I may prompt us to move to the next question.

You have been selected to have a conversation about field experiences in early childhood preparation programs in Minnesota because of your experience as a student teacher working in a field experience triad with an educational institution. This research project focuses on the perspectives of the field experience triad on what constitutes a high-quality field experience and what components of the field experience contribute to a positive, high-quality experience. This study does not aim to evaluate your work as an early childhood student teacher, but rather learn more about the quality of field experiences from your perspective. Questions are framed using the NAEYC's Higher Education Accreditation Standard F: Field Experience Quality.

As a reminder, there are no right or wrong answers. It is ok if you do not know an answer. I am gaining understanding about field experiences from your perspective and our discussion related to field experiences.

Student Interview Questions

Interviewee Code: _____

1. **To begin, tell me about your overall experience with field/practice-based experience.**
2. **How would you consider the quality of those experiences? Explain.** Prompt:
How would you define quality related to field experience?
3. **From your perspective, what elements made/make them high-quality? Which were most important? What elements are lacking?**
4. **What do you remember as significant in those experiences?**
5. **What went well? What did not go well? What would you change? What would you keep?**
6. **Quality of Field Experience (If not discussed by participant in opening questions) Explain what you know about how the college, university, faculty, mentor teachers and students work together before and during the field experience?**

Prompts if not mentioned:

How were/are sites selected?

What were/are the criteria or expectations for how the sites and candidates work together?

What was/is the plan for sequencing and supporting student growth and competency? (example: student first observes, gradual addition of responsibility in classroom as competency grows)

How was the program and student outcomes aligned to standards and competencies?

Which standards are used?

7. **Tell me what you know about how the mentor teacher process works at the college or university... (examples include: mentor teacher selection, criteria, training, expectations and support)**

Prompts if not mentioned:

How are mentor teachers selected?

Do you know if your mentor teacher was oriented and trained? How? What does this include?

How does the college or university ensure consistency of expectations, mentoring and evaluation of students?

How do mentors and faculty receive regular feedback and support?

8. **Candidate supports**
Tell me about what is expected of the student and what type of support is/was included for the student in the field experience?

Prompts if not mentioned:

*What type of expectations are given? How is the student prepared for field experiences?
When and how was /is feedback given?*

9. **From what we have discussed so far, what elements made/make your experiences high-quality? Which were most important? What elements are lacking?**
10. **Theory: Quality of the Individual's Experience** What do you remember about the quality of your own experience in the field experience triad? How did you feel and why?
11. **From your perspective, what elements of your own quality of experience, contributions of the educator, interactions/relationships, building on prior knowledge lend to a high-quality field experience? Which were most important? What elements are lacking?**

Prompts if not discussed:

*What were the contributions are made by the educator (mentor or faculty) to arrange, content, interactions and the environment to help student growth and knowledge?
What do you remember about interactions and relationships with your mentor or faculty within the field experience/s?
Did your experiences build on prior knowledge? In what ways?*

12. **Ideal** If you could design an ideal, high-quality field experience...considering all we have discussed today, your role and perspective in the field experience... what would it include and why?

Prompt if not discussed:

Which elements would be most important to creating a high-quality field experience for you?

13. **Consider, the other two roles (student, mentor, teacher, faculty). What would you imagine as being ideal in creating high-quality field experiences for the other two members of the triad?**
14. **Finally, is there anything else we did not talk about today, that you would like to add as significant to creating high-quality field experiences?**

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts, perspectives and experiences with me today. I so appreciate you taking time to talk with me. This is a great addition to my exploration of quality field experiences in early childhood preparation programs.

From here, I will share a summary of my notes from our conversation today with you by e-mail as a method of member checking my data. This gives you an opportunity to review what I have recorded and to ensure accuracy and make any needed corrections.

Once my study is complete, I will share an overall summary of the study and findings with all participants by e-mail.

Again, thank you for talking with me today!

Appendix B: Interview Protocol Mentor Teacher

RQ1: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty on what constitutes a quality field experience?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty on what components of the field experience are most important to creating a positive, quality field experience for those involved?

Introduction (Script)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. To assist in note-taking, I will be recording our discussion today. I will be the only researcher that will have access to the recordings unless requested by Walden University. Recordings will be kept on a password protected account for five years after they are transcribed. The release form you have signed states that 1) all information shared will be held confidential, and 2) your participation in this study is voluntary and you may leave the study at any point.

I planned this interview to last approximately 45-60 minutes. During this time, I have about 14 questions that I would like to cover. If we seem to be running short on time, I may prompt us to move to the next question.

You have been selected to have a conversation about field experiences in early childhood preparation programs in Minnesota because of your experience as a mentort teacher working in a field experience triad with an educational institution. This research project focuses on the perspectives of the field experience triad on what constitutes a high- quality field experience and what components of the field experience contribute to a positive, high-quality experience. This study does not aim to evaluate your work as an early childhood mentor teacher, but rather learn more about the quality of field experiences from your perspective. Questions are framed using the NAEYC's Higher Education Accreditation Standard F: Field Experience Quality.

As a reminder, there are no right or wrong answers. It is ok if you do not know an answer. I am gaining understanding about field experiences from your perspective and our discussion related to field experiences.

1. **To begin, tell me about your overall experience with field/practice-based experience.**
2. **How would you consider the quality of those experiences? Explain.** Prompt:
How would you define quality related to field experience?
3. **From your perspective, what elements made/make them high-quality? Which were most important? What elements are lacking?**
4. **What do you remember as significant in those experiences?**
5. **What went well? What did not go well? What would you change? What would you keep?**
6. **Quality of Field Experience (If not discussed by participant in opening questions) Explain what you know about how the college, university, faculty, mentor teachers and students work together before and during the field experience?**

Prompts if not mentioned:

How were/are sites selected?

What were/are the criteria or expectations for how the sites and candidates work together?

What was/is the plan for sequencing and supporting student growth and competency? (example: student first observes, gradual addition of responsibility in classroom as competency grows)

How was the program and student outcomes aligned to standards and competencies?

Which standards are used?

7. **Tell me what you know about how the mentor teacher process works at the college or university... (examples include: mentor teacher selection, criteria, training, expectations and support)**

Prompts if not mentioned:

How are mentor teachers selected?

How were you trained and oriented and trained as a mentor teacher? What does this include?

How does the college or university ensure consistency of expectations, mentoring and evaluation of students?

How do mentors and faculty receive regular feedback and support?

8. **Candidate supports**

Tell me about what is expected of the student and what type of support is/was included for the student in the field experience?

Prompts if not mentioned:

*What type of expectations are given? How is the student prepared for field experiences?
When and how was /is feedback given?*

9. **From what we have discussed so far, what elements made/make your experiences high-quality? Which were most important? What elements are lacking?**
10. **Theory: Quality of the Individual's Experience** What do you remember about the quality of your own experience in the field experience triad? How did you feel and why?
11. **From your perspective, what elements of your own quality of experience, contributions of the educator, interactions/relationships, building on prior knowledge lead to a high-quality field experience? Which were most important? What elements are lacking?**

Prompts if not discussed:

*What were the contributions made by the educator (mentor or faculty) to arrange, content, interactions and the environment to help student growth and knowledge?
What do you remember about interactions and relationships with your student or with the faculty within the field experience/s?
Did your experiences build on prior knowledge? In what ways?*

12. **Ideal** If you could design an ideal, high-quality field experience...considering all we have discussed today, your role and perspective in the field experience... what would it include and why?

Prompt if not discussed:

Which elements would be most important to creating a high-quality field experience for you?

13. **Consider, the other two roles (student, faculty). What would you imagine as being ideal in creating high-quality field experiences for the other two members of the triad?**
14. **Finally, is there anything else we did not talk about today, that you would like to add as significant to creating high-quality field experiences?**

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts, perspectives and experiences with me today. I so appreciate you taking time to talk with me. This is a great addition to my exploration of quality field experiences in early childhood preparation programs.

From here, I will share a summary of my notes from our conversation today with you by e-mail as a method of member checking my data. This gives you an opportunity to review what I have recorded and to ensure accuracy and make any needed corrections.

Once my study is complete, I will share an overall summary of the study and findings with all participants by e-mail.

Again, thank you for talking with me today.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol: Faculty

RQ1 : What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty on what constitutes a quality field experience?

RQ2: What are the perspectives of early childhood degree students, mentor teachers, and early childhood faculty on what components of the field experience are most important to creating a positive, quality field experience for those involved?

Introduction (Script)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study. To assist in note-taking, I will be recording our discussion today. I will be the only researcher that will have access to the recordings unless requested by Walden University. Recordings will be kept on a password protected account for five years after they are transcribed. The release form you have signed states that 1) all information shared will be held confidential, and 2) your participation in this study is voluntary and you may leave the study at any point.

I planned this interview to last approximately 45-60 minutes. During this time, I have about 14 questions that I would like to cover. If we seem to be running short on time, I may prompt us to move to the next question.

You have been selected to have a conversation about field experiences in early childhood preparation programs in Minnesota because of your experience as a faculty member working in a field experience triad with an educational institution. This research project focuses on the perspectives of the field experience triad on what constitutes a high- quality field experience and what components of the field experience contribute to a positive, high-quality experience. This study does not aim to evaluate your work as an early childhood faculty member, but rather to learn more about the quality of field experiences from your perspective. Questions are framed using the NAEYC's Higher Education Accreditation Standard F: Field Experience Quality.

As a reminder, there are no right or wrong answers. It is ok if you do not know an answer. I am gaining understanding about field experiences from your perspective and our discussion related to field experiences.

Faculty Interview Questions

Interviewee Code: _____

1. **To begin, tell me about your overall experience with field/practice-based experience.**
2. **How would you consider the quality of those experiences? Explain.** Prompt:
How would you define quality related to field experience?
3. **From your perspective, what elements made/make them high-quality? Which were most important? What elements are lacking?**
4. **What do you remember as significant in those experiences?**
5. **What went well? What did not go well? What would you change? What would you keep?**
6. **Quality of Field Experience (If not discussed by participant in opening questions) Explain what you know about how the college, university, faculty, mentor teachers and students work together before and during the field experience?**

Prompts if not mentioned:

How were/are sites selected?

What were/are the criteria or expectations for how the sites and candidates work together?

What was/is the plan for sequencing and supporting student growth and competency? (example: student first observes, gradual addition of responsibility in classroom as competency grows)

How was the program and student outcomes aligned to standards and competencies?

Which standards are used?

7. **Tell me what you know about how the mentor teacher process works at the college or university... (examples include: mentor teacher selection, criteria, training, expectations and support)**

Prompts if not mentioned:

How are mentor teachers selected?

How are mentor teachers oriented and trained? What does this include?

How does the college or university ensure consistency of expectations, mentoring and evaluation of students?

How do mentors and faculty receive regular feedback and support?

8. *Candidate supports*

Tell me about what is expected of the student and what type of support is/was included for the student in the field experience?

Prompts if not mentioned:

What type of expectations are given? How is the student prepared for field experiences?

When and how was /is feedback given?

9. **From what we have discussed so far, what elements made/make your experiences high-quality? Which were most important? What elements are lacking?**

10. *Theory: Quality of the Individual's Experience* **What do you remember about the quality of your own experience in the field experience triad? How did you feel and why?**

11. **From your perspective, what elements of your own quality of experience, contributions of the educator, interactions/relationships, building on prior knowledge lead to a high-quality field experience? Which were most important? What elements are lacking?**

Prompts if not discussed:

What were the contributions are made by the educator (mentor or faculty) to arrange, content, interactions and the environment to help student growth and knowledge?

What do you remember about interactions and relationships with your student or the mentor teacher within the field experience/s?

Did your experiences build on prior knowledge? In what ways?

12. **Ideal If you could design an ideal, high-quality field experience...considering all we have discussed today, your role and perspective in the field experience... what would it include and why?**

Prompt if not discussed:

Which elements would be most important to creating a high-quality field experience for you?

13. **Consider, the other two roles (student, mentor teacher). What would you imagine as being ideal in creating high-quality field experiences for the other two members of the triad?**

14. **Finally, is there anything else we did not talk about today, that you would like to add as significant to creating high-quality field experiences?**

Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts, perspectives and experiences with me today. I so appreciate you taking time to talk with me. This is a great addition to my exploration of quality field experiences in early childhood preparation programs.

From here, I will share a summary of my notes from our conversation today with you by e-mail as a method of member checking my data. This gives you an opportunity to review what I have recorded and to ensure accuracy and make any needed corrections.

Once my study is complete, I will share an overall summary of the study and findings with all participants by e-mail.

Again, thank you for talking with me today.

Appendix D: Student Demographic and Background Information

Student Demographic and Background Information
Interview Code:

Please answer the following questions to give background information prior to your interview.

I consent to participation in the Perspectives of Early Childhood Degree Students, Mentors, and Faculty on Quality Field Experiences Research Study.

Yes

No

College or University field experience was connected to: _____

Age

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65 or older

Gender Male Female Prefer not to answer

Education 2-year Degree BA/BS/BAS MA Doctoral Degree

Ethnicity

Hispanic/Latino

Black or African American, Non-Hispanic

White, Non-Hispanic

American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic

Asian, Non-Hispanic

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, NonHispanic

Two or more races, Non-Hispanic

Race and/or Ethnicity Unknown

Prefer not to answer

Years of experience in the Field of ECE:

1-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26-30 30 or more

What is your current position? _____

How long have you worked in your current position? _____

Worked in the field prior to coursework and/or during coursework: Yes/No

Age groups, settings and type of field experiences as part of your preparation program that you participated in:

Infants Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: Home-based Center-based Childcare Early Head Start

Other:

Toddlers Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: Home-based Center-based Childcare Early Head Start

Other:

Preschool Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: Home-based Center-based Childcare Preschool
School District Pre-k Head Start Other

K-3 Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: School District Early Elementary Other:

Settings were:

Rural Yes No

Suburban Yes No

Urban Yes No

I experienced working with diverse populations in 2 or more settings: Yes No

Appendix E: Mentor Demographic and Background Information

Mentor Demographic and Background Information**Interview Code:**

Please answer the following questions to give background information prior to your interview.

I consent to participation in the Perspectives of Early Childhood Degree Students, Mentors, and Faculty on Quality Field Experiences Research Study.

Yes

No

College or University field experience was connected to: _____

Age

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65 or older

Gender Male

Female

Prefer not to answer

Education

2-year Degree

BA/BS/BAS

MA

Doctoral

Ethnicity

Hispanic/Latino

Black or African American, Non-Hispanic

White, Non-Hispanic

American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic

Asian, Non-Hispanic

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, NonHispanic

Two or more races, Non-Hispanic

Race and/or Ethnicity Unknown

Prefer not to answer

Years of experience in the Field of ECE:

1-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26-30 30 or more

What is your current position? _____

How long have you worked in your current position? _____

Age groups, settings and type of field experiences that you have served as a mentor in for a college/university preparation program. In what type of practice did the student engage while in your classroom (observe, interact/practice or student teaching)?

Infants Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: Home-based Center-based Childcare Early Head Start

Other:

Toddlers Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: Home-based Center-based Childcare Early Head Start

Other:

Preschool Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: Home-based Center-based Childcare Preschool
School District Pre-k Head Start Other

K-3 Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: School District Early Elementary Other:

Settings were:

Rural Yes No

Suburban Yes No

Urban Yes No

The setting I work in serves diverse children and families: Yes No

Appendix F: Faculty Demographic and Background Information

Faculty Demographic and Background Information**Interview Code:**

Please answer the following questions to give background information prior to your interview.

I consent to participation in the Perspectives of Early Childhood Degree Students, Mentors, and Faculty on Quality Field Experiences Research Study.

Yes

No

College or University field experience was connected to: _____

Age

18-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

55-64

65 or older

Gender Male

Female

Prefer not to answer

Education

2-year Degree

BA/BS/BAS

MA

Doctoral

Degree

Ethnicity

Hispanic/Latino

Black or African American, Non-Hispanic

White, Non-Hispanic

American Indian or Alaska Native, Non-Hispanic

Asian, Non-Hispanic

Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, NonHispanic

Two or more races, Non-Hispanic

Race and/or Ethnicity Unknown

Prefer not to answer

Years of experience in the Field of ECE:

1-5 6-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 26-30 30 or more

What is your current position? _____

How long have you worked in your current position? _____

Age groups, settings and type of field experiences in which you have served as a faculty member supervising in a college/university preparation program. In what type of practice did the student engage while in your classroom (observe, interact/practice or student teaching)?

Infants Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: Home-based Center-based Childcare Early Head Start

Other:

Toddlers Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: Home-based Center-based Childcare Early Head Start

Other:

Preschool Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: Home-based Center-based Childcare Preschool
School District Pre-k Head Start Other

K-3 Yes No

If Yes: Observe Only Practice Experience Student Teaching

Setting: School District Early Elementary Other:

Settings were:

Rural Yes No

Suburban Yes No

Urban Yes No

Two or more of the settings in which students practice in serve diverse children and families: Yes No