

**6<sup>th</sup> International Academic Conference  
on Teaching, Learning and Education**

**Collaboration 101- An Immersive Teacher  
Education Experience and Its Impact on Pre-Service  
Teachers' Perceptions of Title I Schools**

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**Abstract**

It is incumbent on teacher education programs to better equip our candidates with the knowledge and skills they will need in contemporary classrooms to better serve students with diverse learning needs. Early field experiences are essential to effective teacher candidate development. The purpose of this study was to investigate pre-service teachers' perceptions of Title I schools prior to and following a 12-week field experience in the school using a qualitative survey method. Early field experiences were implemented in which 22 pre-service teachers worked directly with students having disabilities and from low-income families through a college-level introduction course in a community-based Title I school. A Title I Questionnaire was given both prior to and following the field experience. Pre-field survey responses indicate that about half of the pre-service education candidates had some understanding of how schools are designated as Title I. Home life and behavior were the most common challenges identified by the candidates. A majority indicated that student behavioral issues were a common occurrence in weekly observations and stated the desire for more behavioral support in their program to meet the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Nearly all pre-service teachers stated a high likelihood of accepting a position in a similar school and reported the need for additional administrative support and resources in working with children in Title I schools. Findings suggest that implementing early field experiences fostered a deeper understanding of the school's culture and the need for qualified teachers, administrative support and maintained pre-service educators' desire to impact students' lives.

**Keywords:** early field experiences, high-poverty schools, beliefs, partnerships, behavioral issues



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### 1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, there is an increased need for teachers. According to García and Weiss (2019), the teacher shortage in America is “real, large and growing, and worse than we thought”. In the last decade, enrollment in traditional teacher education programs has dropped more than one-third. Disadvantaged and impoverished schools are most affected by the shortage of credentialed teachers. In addition to difficulties with recruitment of teachers to the profession, teacher attrition is a problem. This issue is disproportionately seen in schools which are difficult to staff; those which mostly serve students of color and children in poverty. In schools where students are eligible for a free and reduced lunch, uncertified teachers are hired at a rate of four times more than certified teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Working conditions make it hard to attract the newest and most qualified teachers. Part of being qualified is to knowing how to instruct all students, including students having disabilities, and children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Hence, the goal of an equitable education for all students is disrupted when the shortage of teachers is distributed so unevenly. Research shows that putting candidates in early field experiences increases their goal to become a teacher and further, they become more motivated to teach after working with students who are the highest risk. (Washburn-Moses, Kopp, & Hetttersimer, 2012). Further, Siwatu (2011) found that when presented with field experiences in multiple classrooms, pre-service teachers were given the opportunity to see both effective and ineffective methods of working with all types of learners. Thus, the needs of our candidates will be met, and the schools and students they will serve in their future classrooms. This current partnership between a college and local public high- poverty school ensures that our teacher candidates are working with diverse school populations, learning about classroom management techniques and practicing differentiated instruction. The program strives to ensure that they are knowledgeable of and skilled in the intricacies of and inclination towards working in a Title I School.

### Review of the Literature

Many studies have examined how teachers develop instruction during their first year of teaching (Mutton, Hagger & Burn, 2011); and the impacts of a year-long student internship on the first year teaching (FERENCE, Clement, & Smith (2009). Challenges during the first year are very well documented. Griffin et al. (2009) found that the majority of teachers ranked time as the most significant problem, followed by behavior management. Under the current demands of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA 2004) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), teachers and schools are required to implement evidence-based plans to assist particular groups of students who are falling behind, i.e.) students with disabilities. White and Mason (2006) found that special education teachers need the most assistance with Individual Education Plans (IEPs), processes and procedures in eligibility determination, and paperwork, but they also needed help with referral and behavior



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management. They further indicated that their challenges included getting acclimated to the school, strategies, assessment, collaboration, and using the curriculum. It is widely accepted that traditional instructional strategies are considered a “one-size fits all”, which they are not, and thus are inadequate to meet diverse students’ needs (Tomlinson, 1995, 1999, 2003a, & 2003b). Teachers must be able to tailor instruction to meet the needs of all students (Forness, 2001; Klingner, Ahwee, Pilonieta, & Menendez, 2003). To come up with new strategies, ideas, approaches or to teach the curriculum, teachers will need to be prepared with the knowledge and skills early on in their teacher preparation programs.

For students with disabilities, our state is among the most inclusive in the United States with 78% of students having disabilities included for 80% or more of the school day (FLDOE, 2015). Unfortunately, many teacher preparation institutions in Florida require only one course in Exceptional Student Education, with scant coverage on students who are at risk for school failure. This translates into a typical Education major taking one course explicitly in exceptionalities. In addition, many teacher preparation programs do not offer courses in educating disadvantaged and/or underserved populations.

There are very few recent studies of students’ experiences in early field opportunities prior to their first year of teaching which examine how their perceptions of schools vary over time. Without understanding at-risk schools and students, pre-service educators often feel unprepared and overwhelmed in meeting students’ needs. According to a 2022 National Healthcare Quality and Disparities Report, almost 20% of children in the United States, ages 2-8 years (17.4%), had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder. Low-income children and youth aged 6-17 who have mental health and behavioral challenges are five times more likely to drop out of high school. Therefore, teacher education programs should equip our candidates with the knowledge and skills they will need in contemporary classrooms to better serve students with diverse learning needs, especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Method**

The present study delineates pre-service educators’ beliefs about Title I Schools and competencies and inadequacies they believe will affect their success in their future career. The researcher sought to bring the experiences of pre-service teachers to working directly with students with disabilities and from low-income families in a community-based resource Title I school. Perceptions which pre-service teachers held were examined regarding Title I Schools and how these perceptions changed after a 12-week intensive field experience.

While the #1 rated school district out of 67 in the state of Florida, and #2 ranked for best teachers, one elementary school within the district was rated a D school during the 2018-2019 school year. Accordingly, the researcher targeted this school in particular for a collaboration between our education practicum students and students from this local school. This particular high-poverty elementary school, like many across the United States, is struggling to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers. During the last school year alone,

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three teachers resigned mid-year amid growing contract stalemate/impasse and political agendas. Alongside this trend, we also see a steady decrease in the number of teacher education applicants at colleges and universities with the number lessening each year. In partnership with our local school district, our long-term vision is to afford teacher candidates unique opportunities in our Title I/Community Partnership School which will enhance both recruitment and retention in the teaching field.

A Community Partnership School (CPS) team strives to serve the needs, not only of its students, but of the community. Available to CPS are immediate community resources which address hunger, homelessness, family violence, mental health, and health care needs. By addressing these barriers right at the school, students are offered more equitable opportunities for success (Children's Home Society of Florida, 2023). The Title I/Community Partnership School has an Economically Disadvantaged Free and Reduced Lunch rate of 100%. The student population is comprised of 43% minority and 6% of students have limited English proficiency. In addition, 40% of the student population has been identified as receiving Exceptional Student Education Services where only 1/3 of students with disabilities are able to reach the level of proficiency on state reading and math assessments (SIP, 2019).

By completing their field experience at the school, pre-service educators were able to add to their knowledge base by 1) Comparing typical and atypical development of physical, cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional stages of students in the Pre-K-12 educational system; and 2) Interpreting practices in the provision of education for students with exceptionalities based on legal and ethical standards; 3) Responding to their preconceptions or misconceptions about teaching and learning; and 4) Identifying how to differentiate instruction based on student learning needs and recognition of individual differences in students.

Qualitative data was collected during the spring 2023 semester from 22 teacher education candidates enrolled in an early field experience course. Pre-service teachers were from six different states, however, the majority were from Florida. Ninety five percent of students were Caucasian females in their freshman or sophomore year of college attending a small private liberal arts college with three pre-professional state-approved programs in elementary education. The high percentage of Caucasian females was reflective of the nature of teacher education programs offering an Elementary Education major.

The college's Introduction to Exceptionalities course was taught on-site at our partnership/Title I school in a classroom reserved for community workshops. Every week, the format of course delivery was the same: there were two course sections and the first hour of each course section involved observation of a mentor teacher's class. After observations, students then returned to the class for instruction and processing of content related to their observations. Students rotated through 12 different teachers over the semester who served as their mentor in the classroom. Pre-service teachers gained experience by working alongside a different general or special education teacher ranging in grades Pre-kindergarten through 5<sup>th</sup> grade. In a weekly rotation, pre-service educators interacted with a different classroom each



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week, preparing them for a multitude of situations in their future teaching positions. While completing their required field-based hours, they were also supervised by their college teacher who provided support and guidance toward insightful and relevant connections between course material and field experiences.

### **Questionnaire**

At the very start of the semester, candidates were given a Title I Questionnaire based on a 2020 research study conducted by Thomas-Richmond, R. Costner, Hit, and Costner (2020). Five of the items from their Title I Questionnaire were selected for the present study relevant to the needs of our partnership/Title I school in hiring new teachers. The following questions were administered in a pre-post field experience: 1) How are schools designated as Title I schools?, 2) Are teachers in Title I schools as qualified as teachers in non-Title I schools, 3) Is the support given to teachers in Title I schools by the principal or assistant principal similar to the support given in non-Title I schools, 4) Would you like to teach in a Title I School; Why or why not?, 5) What are the unique challenges that teachers face in Title I schools?

### **Results**

Results show that deliberate efforts in setting up structured and early field experiences affect beliefs regarding entering the teaching profession and somewhat impacts the willingness to work with at-risk populations in Title I Schools. In examining the knowledge of Title I schools, pre-field survey responses showed that 86% of all participants could state one or two criteria regarding the designation of Title I Schools, that is, from low income and/or a percentage of students receiving a free or reduced lunch. About half of them initially could identify the state threshold that schools are eligible for School-Wide Title I funds if not less than 40% of the students are from low-income families. Most of the surveys showed that the experiences reinforced what students already said in the beginning of the semester. For example, prior to their 12-week intensive experience, 17 out of 22 students indicated that they would be open to working in a Title I School because of reasons surrounding good teaching that can happen anywhere, or taking an opportunity to teach regardless of where it was. On a more supportive level, many students mentioned that children needed a caring teacher to talk to and they felt for that reason, they could make more of an impact on students' lives working in a Title I school. One stated that "Yes, I would teach in a Title I School even it is difficult and could be challenging but all students deserve to have a good education despite their living conditions which should not take away from that".

Five pre-service teachers who initially were unsure about teaching in a Title I school didn't change their responses after their field experiences. They stuck with responses along the same lines, and held onto the same level of uncertainty for example,





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“I have not decided yet, or I go back and forth”. “I want to be involved in creating a secure and loving environment for the students, but I don’t know I have what it takes. I have the heart, but am not sure I have the strength”. The pre-service educators indicated they would “maybe teach in a low-income school because more teachers are needed in Title I schools” or “possibly, if there was a good support system within the school like this one which has a variety of aids and supports that helps the teachers provide for the students”. One student, indicated even less of a likelihood on the post-survey, responding “after attending this elementary school every week, it would be too challenging for me to teach in a Title I school.” In contrast, there was one pre-service educator who changed their attitude, “teaching in a Title I school would depend on the situation”, to a more positive post-survey response, “I would teach in a Title I school or at any elementary school that I know would bring me lots of opportunities.”

The most significant difference in the pre- post survey responses was the in the detail of responses when asked about the unique challenges in Title I schools. On the pre-test, answers were fairly basic and included: teaching life skills, making sure students have food, and transportation, and more behavioral issues. After spending the semester in a Title, I school, it was evident that their post-survey answers were more expansive, and pulled from their observations in the classroom. For instance, a remarkable difference was shown in one student’s thoughts between the pre-field, “many students’ home lives are difficult which can cause behavioral issues” to the post, “a high percentage of students are living in low-income families. Therefore, teachers will see students who are more exhausted due to having to work and many need more accommodations and support to meet their specific needs more often. It is harder for the students to learn when their needs are not being met.” Other more elaborative post-survey responses included that “students may not have clean clothes or a parent may not be in the picture” and “there is a lack of parental support or living in poverty and we see students with more serious behaviors and lashing out more because of their emotional challenges”. One pre-service teacher was uncertain in their post-field response, “I would like to teach in a Title I school, but I’m hesitant because I know the Title I schools don’t get lot of funding and many schools don’t receive a lot of support. With there already being a teacher shortage, I’m afraid I will quickly burn out in a more unsupported role”. This particular responder also felt that administrators give less support in Title I schools over non-Title I schools.

The responders identified the most common challenges in Title I schools as students’ home life and behavior. With regard to the question about whether they would perceive spending more time on managing students’ behaviors in Title I schools, an overwhelming majority of students wrote yes. They were able to elaborate more on their thoughts in the post-field surveys. A better understanding of behavioral challenges was best seen in this response showing how the field experience was an integral part of their preparation: “more time is spent in Title I Schools with managing behaviors, but our school



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also had resource offices and behavioral therapists to work with the kids rather than take away the teacher time with the behavior”. Another pre-service educator remarked, “from what I have observed, it seems that Title I schools have to manage more unique behavior issues than non-Title I schools. However, students at either Title I or non-Title I schools are going to have to deal with behavior issues anyway”. This shows a positive inclination of working in a Title I school regardless of the having the knowledge that there may be more behavioral issues at low income schools.

The responses indicate that the students had mixed interpretations of their view of administrative support in Title I versus non-Title I schools. Eight of the 22 pre-service teachers were either unsure if there was a difference or felt that there was less support at Title I schools. Interestingly, one responder reflected that “based on what I’ve seen here at this elementary school, I would say yes, there is more administrative support at Title I schools”. Another responder indicated the support was not driven by a school, but by a person, her post-field response, “I would assume (and hope) that the support provided is similar in both Title I and non-Title I schools since support is something anyone can give anyone (unlike government funding), principals or assistant principals should provide the same support”. This student felt a bit differently at the end of their experience, “I think that there should be slightly more support given in Title I schools because the teachers there deal with more from students”.

Ninety-one percent of the pre-service teachers remarked that the qualifications of teachers in Title I and non-Title I schools are the same, both before and after their early field experiences. One responder in particular changed her mind from a neutral position and stated prior to the field experience, “it depends, it can be difficult to find teachers as it is... some have the qualifications, however due to the teacher shortage, a lot are not”. The post-survey response moved more to the affirmative, “They have the same schooling so yes, I think it is important that they continually have professional development on specified common issues in Title I schools”.

### **Discussion**

It was hypothesized that students in our teacher preparation program would have vastly different beliefs, knowledge and skill sets, based upon their own schooling and personal experiences with Title I schools. Nonetheless, nearly all of the pre-field surveys coalesced around having a more favorable outlook on the likelihood of accepting a position in a similar school. Many of them held onto their positive thinking about the likelihood of working in an impoverished school setting. It was evident that their 12-week experience maintained their viewpoints and inclination toward working in a Title I school.

Yet, qualitative data indicates that they were aware if they accepted a teaching position in a Title I school, they would need additional administrative support and resources in working with children. A majority of pre-service educators indicated that student behavioral issues were a common occurrence in weekly observations. They stated the desire for more



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behavioral support in their program to meet the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Although several pre-service teachers believed that children from low-income families lacked reliable transportation, none of them linked chronic absenteeism to a problem endemic to Title I schools. There is a higher rate of chronic absenteeism among students living in poverty and attending low-income schools, impoverished schools, thus negatively impacting student achievement (García & Weiss, 2018; Michelmores & Dynarski, 2017). However, only one pre-service educator mentioned low academic achievement in the pre or post surveys. Clearly, more course content should cover addressing attendance issues due to the fact that the impact of attendance on student achievement is so significant that absenteeism is an “indicator of school quality or student success in the accountability systems under the Every Student Succeeds Act” (Rafa, 2017, p. 1).

Despite evidence that children who come from low-income families and are taught in high-poverty schools, are consistently taught by lower-credentialed and novice teachers (García & Weiss, 2019), the pre-service teachers in the present study did not show evidence of this knowledge. Both on the pre and post surveys, they overwhelmingly reported that teachers are equally credentialed in Title I and non-Title I schools. Perhaps, seeing so many different teachers over the course of the semester would explain their beliefs, especially on the post-surveys. Another explanation is that pre-service educators may have just assumed that the teachers who they were observing had full teaching credentials including licensure and educational background.

The intent of field experience in a high-poverty school provided pre-service educators the realities of teaching in today’s classrooms where twenty percent of low-income children and youth aged 6-17 have mental and behavioral challenges (National Library of Medicine 2022). On a bright note, despite the fact that pre- and post-surveys revealed that pre-service educators are aware of the growing realities of the classroom, there was only one student who would decline the opportunity to work in a Title I school after their 12-week experience, not because of the challenges alone, but self-disclosing their awareness of not being able to handle these unique challenges.

Several opportunities were afforded to the pre-service educators in addition to the requisite field experience hours including opportunities to volunteer for tutoring and academic games at Family Nights, read-alouds with younger grades, proctoring of state testing, and the development and implementation of a Spanish Club for fifth grade students. These outside experiences will hopefully strengthen students’ ties to our partner school, families, and community at-large. This project continues to work and grow toward ensuring candidates are becoming prepared and knowledgeable, thereby increasing the understanding of the intricacies of and inclination towards working in a one of the four Title I schools inside the county or elsewhere. With similar experiences planned for future college education students, the needs of our candidates will be met while also address the local schools’ need for prepared teachers and students they will serve in the future classrooms.



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### Conclusion

This research supports the reality that teacher perceptions can be influenced by early field experiences and have an impact on student achievement and behavior. Early field experiences which involve observation, as well as direct opportunities to work with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, provide students the chance to become more involved in their community. In addition, it impacts their choice to work in a Title I School upon graduation. Through structured semester-long experiences, pre-service teachers developed a strong reflection, significant personal growth, and substantial depth in their perceptions of the challenges that educators face in Title I schools. Despite the challenges, it was evident in their shared ideals that all students can learn and as future teachers, they have a powerful role in that process.

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