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Third Space Creates Collaborative Environments to Develop Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

In the fall of 2012, 11% (n=157) of clinical practice (i.e. student teaching) candidates at a metropolitan university were in jeopardy of not passing clinical practice. Public schools in the area began to voice their concerns, and placements of candidates became a challenge. As a result, the university re-envisioned the program, utilizing third space to facilitate discourse between local school districts and university faculty. The development of third space was based on program data, which led to the following shifts in the program: scaffolded coursework with increased time in the field; instructional coaching prior to clinical practice; and a system for collecting feedback to sustain partnerships. Collaboration between P-12 schools and the university was essential in preparing candidates to connect theory and apply it in practice. By spring 2016, the initiatives implemented led to a 12% decrease of candidates in jeopardy of not passing clinical practice. As the teacher preparation program continues to grow, one of the biggest challenges is continuing to build and sustain new partnerships. The authors provide a framework for how programs could adapt some of these initiatives to develop and sustain university and school partnerships.

Keywords: third space, teacher preparation, field-based experience, clinical practice

Introduction

Today, as higher education works to align programs to state and Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards, teacher preparation programs and state licensing facilities are making significant changes to how they assess pre-service teacher candidates' preparedness to enter the teaching field. The new standards require pre-service teachers to

demonstrate that they acquired the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be effective teachers by providing evidence of their learning (i.e. portfolios, videotapes of teaching, reflections on performance, analyses of students' work, tests of pedagogical and content knowledge). Boyd et al. (2008) advocated for a full year of student teaching. While implementing a full year of clinical practice (i.e. student teaching) is not possible for most teacher preparation programs due to a strain on resources, Boyd et al. (2008) also supported well-supervised, extended time in the field with alignment between theory and practice, which they suggested produced more effective candidates for the field of teaching.

DeAngelis, Wall, and Che (2013) found that candidates who were satisfied with their pre-service teacher preparation were more likely to stay at their current school (and in education, in general) than those who were not satisfied. Given the current pressure for educational reform, the need for preparing and retaining highly-qualified teachers, and the implementation of new standards in higher education, a way to bridge theory and practice for teaching candidates is through well-developed and supported field experiences. Field experiences create a holistic approach for learning the art of teaching. Strong preparation programs provide teacher candidates with field experiences that integrate theory and pedagogy and provide candidates with opportunities to develop their understanding through focused inquiry, observation, and guided practice (Hollins, 2011). Ronfeldt et al. (2014) found that teachers who engage in coursework aligned with opportunities to practice teaching in authentic environments are better prepared for the realities of the classroom and more likely to remain in the profession.

This paper expands upon data collected at a midwestern metropolitan university from 2012-2015 (Wilcoxen et al., 2015) to further illustrate how one teacher preparation program strengthened the connection between university coursework and school field experiences. The authors utilized program data to re-envision the development of third space in field-based teacher preparation and outline steps taken to align the goals of the teacher preparation program and community partners to support candidates in field-based experiences and completion of clinical practice.

Literature Review

Field-Based Teacher Preparation

Pre-service teachers bring their own perceptions and experiences to the classroom. These perceptions can lead to a disconnect in a candidate's understanding of the complexities of the classroom. Teacher preparation programs have been criticized for the lack of connection between what is learned in university-based coursework and its application in authentic school settings (Clarke & Winslade, 2019; Darling-Hammond, 2009; NCATE, 2010), therefore candidates need support in gaining the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be effective teachers.

Field experiences bridge the disconnect between theory and practice (Hammerness & Kennedy, 2019). Here, candidates are exposed to a variety of instructional strategies, the engagement each draws, and the impact of assessment. Furthermore, P-12 practitioners are highly influential during fieldwork (Orland-Barak & Wang, 2020; Ronfeldt et al., 2018). In the last ten years, teacher preparation programs have pivoted to increase the amount of time candidates are spending in field-based experiences (Lee, 2018), yet candidates are often left to observe teaching while P-12 practitioners are provided little direction or support from the university (AACTE, 2018).

The effectiveness of the experience is relational to the collaboration, support, and expertise of the P-12 practitioner and placement itself (Torrez & Krebs, 2012). Prospective teachers need opportunities to not only observe in classrooms, but to engage in authentic teaching experiences that allow them to implement instruction and reflect on their practice (Clarke & Winslade, 2019). Early experiences coupled with support and timely feedback can help candidates grow their confidence. Furthermore, effective clinical partnerships that pair academic coursework with field-based experiences "assure that pedagogy and effective practices are learned, refined, and mastered by aspiring educators under the guidance of skilled experts" (AACTE, 2018, p.44). To aid in the communication between university faculty and P-12 schools, a collaborative space with representatives from all parties needs to be established to create a shared vision and goals to support candidates as they learn and apply the art and science of teaching.

Defining Third Space

The conceptual framework for this study rests in the concept of third space. The concept of third space has been used in multiple fields. According to Sailors and Hoffman (2019), "Hybrid spaces bridge the gap between academic coursework and traditional practicum experiences so beginning teachers can be more innovative in their practices thus transforming education" (p. 125). For the purpose of this paper, the authors refer to this hybrid space as third space.

Third space refers to the practice of bringing pre-service teachers, P-12 partners, and university faculty together to create learning opportunities. This can be difficult. Goodlad (1993) acknowledged difficulties in reaching symbiosis in collaborative partnerships as well as the cultural differences between the university and P-12 environment. This is only compounded by each system having its own vocabulary and accreditation requirements.

Consider the relationship, conversations, and learning between the pre-service teacher and the mentor teacher as one distinct space. In this space, guidance is fueled by the standards and needs of the P-12 classroom. The relationship, conversations, and learning between the pre-service teacher and the university are a second distinct space. In this second space, guidance is grounded in the needs of the university. Both are necessary, and the space between these two distinct

spaces, the theoretical third space, is extremely complex; the pre-service teacher is quite literally caught in the middle between the university and the P-12 classroom. Successful conditions and navigation of the third space environment are critical for pre-service teacher's success during clinical practice. The ultimate goal is to bridge theory learned in university coursework with practices in a live classroom (Zeichner, 2010).

Collaborative models, such as third space, facilitate the dialogue necessary to support students. Abbott and McNight (2010) highlighted the impact of collaboration between educators by indicating three positive outcomes: more accurate identification of student needs and instructional strategies; greater communication across grade levels and content areas; and an increase in job satisfaction and teacher retention. Opportunities in the field expose candidates to the varied cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic contexts that help pre-service teachers develop their own cultural competence and culturally responsive teaching abilities (Zeichner, 2012).

Context

The midwestern metropolitan university described in this paper serves 15,000 students campus wide, and two out of every three educators in the metropolitan area hold a degree from the university. Given the size of the teacher preparation program, over 1,000 pre-service teachers are placed in field-based experiences each year. The university's connection to area schools and development of successful teachers is vital to the community. Recent changes to the state accreditation requirements made field-based experiences a central component of teacher preparation. Community partnerships are essential in helping candidates obtain the 100 hours of practicum needed for certification in addition to completing 14 weeks of clinical practice.

The Challenge

Between fall 2012 and 2013, the university saw an increase in clinical practice (i.e. student teaching) candidates in jeopardy of failing clinical practice. The percentage grew from 11% (of 157) in fall 2012 to 14% (of 142) in fall 2013. Challenges derived from an overall lack of classroom experience prior to clinical practice. Candidates did not understand the ebb and flow of a school day and struggled to apply even basic lesson plans. The lack of practice applying what they had learned from their university coursework in authentic school contexts negatively impacted all aspects of the classroom, including student learning. As shown in Table 1, this led to a decreased acceptance of P-12 placement requests and added tension to partnerships.

Table 1. Candidates in jeopardy of failing clinical practice

Year	Total number of Clinical Practice Candidates	Total Number of Candidates in Jeopardy	Percent in Jeopardy
Fall 2012	157	17	11%
Spring 2013	192	21	10%
Fall 2013	142	20	14%

Potential Consequences

University supervisors and mentor teachers expressed concerns about candidates in jeopardy of unsuccessfully completing clinical practice. At-risk candidates required extensive support and resources; therefore, each candidate at risk was assigned an intervention team. This team consisted of the teacher candidate, mentor teacher(s), the university supervisor, a clinical practice liaison, the university field experience director, and the school building administrator.

Each member of the team played an important role in providing support to the pre-service teacher. Together, the team implemented assistance plans and narrowed support by focusing on three to five indicators from the summative assessment. Team members worked closely to implement the assistance plan and monitor progress with weekly progress checks. Additional observations and coaching support were provided based on candidate needs. The entire team met weekly for progress-monitoring discussions.

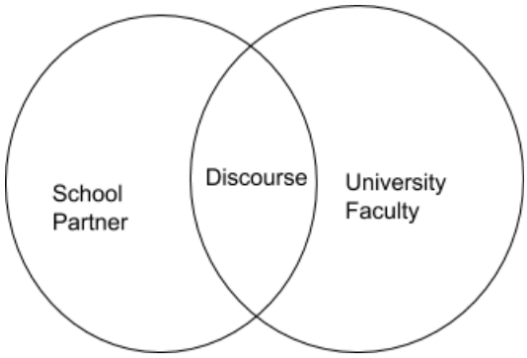
As the number of candidates needing assistance plans grew, management of these plans became difficult. The increased need for support required an extensive amount of time and resources; consequently, the teacher preparation program developed plans to take a proactive approach to field experiences leading up to clinical practice. As a result, the university redesigned the program and grounded efforts in collaboration with school districts to find common solutions that benefited all.

Description of Third Space in Teacher Preparation

Creating partnerships between teacher preparation programs and local schools has been at the forefront of conversations to redesign teacher education for the past two decades (Beck, 2020; Hollins, 2011; Moore & Sampson, 2008). Universities have been criticized for the lack of collaboration between schools, mentor teachers, and university faculty. Furthermore, university

faculty are criticized for not connecting coursework to the realities of the classroom. Many researchers refer to this as the theory-practice divide (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Klein et al., 2013; Zeichner, 2010) or two-worlds pitfall (Braaten, 2019; Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985). As previously outlined, third space refers to a hybrid space that brings two separate domains together through discourse and collaboration with the intent to address challenges and construct new knowledge (Klein et al., 2010; Zeichner, 2010). In teacher preparation, third space environments create a structure to support pre-service teachers with quality observations conducted by university instructors and coaches, opportunities for reflective practice, and emphasis on P-12 student needs.

Figure 1. Third Space and Discourse



P-12 schools and the university engaged in discourse and collaboration as part of third space to address the challenges candidates experienced in clinical practice and renew the partnerships with local school districts. Monthly meetings between the university and a group of human resource representatives from 12 area school districts, along with two educational service units, allowed for discourse. The platform provided space for rich discussion among partners to co-create desired outcomes of the experience for all parties involved (i.e. teacher candidates, mentor teachers, administrators, university faculty). This led to the development of a scope and sequence with clear goals, aligned field experiences, and strengthened partnerships with local schools. Discourse within the third space led to innovative solutions with three outcomes to implement: scaffolded coursework with increased time in the field; instructional coaching prior to clinical practice; and a system for collecting feedback to sustain partnerships.

Analysis

Researchers used program data and qualitative feedback from the mentor teachers and teacher candidates participating in field-based experiences to evaluate the impact, if any, the initiatives derived from third space had on teacher candidates' preparation.

As mentioned previously, in fall 2012, 11% (of 157) clinical practice candidates were in jeopardy of unsuccessfully completing clinical practice. In spring 2013, 10% (of 192) candidates were in jeopardy, and in fall 2013, the candidates in jeopardy jumped to 14% (of 142). With the changes made to the program in creating a productive third space, there has been a change in the number of candidates in jeopardy of unsuccessfully completing their program. After only one semester of implementation, the number of candidates dropped to 5%, then to 4%. By spring 2016, the first cohort of candidates to complete the program with the strengthened partnerships, increased field, and instructional coaching support saw a 12% decrease in the amount of candidates at risk for unsuccessfully completing clinical practice, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Candidates in jeopardy of failing clinical practice after the implementation of instructional coaching

Year	Total number of Clinical Practice Candidates	Total Number of Candidates in Jeopardy	Percent in Jeopardy
Spring 2014	159	8	5%
Fall 2014	159	7	4%
Spring 2015	128	6	5%
Fall 2015	145	7	5%
Spring 2016	138	3	2%
Fall 2016	70	3	4%
Spring 2017	107	6	6%
Fall 2017	59	6	10%
Spring 2018	128	8	6%
Fall 2018	58	2	3%
Spring 2019	118	8	7%

It is important to note in fall 2017 funding changed, and graduate assistants (GA) were hired and joined the remaining two full-time instructional coaches. The following year, as enrollment increased, additional GAs were hired. To fulfill this role, GAs must have five years of P-12 teaching experiences and hold a current teaching certificate. Recent experience working in schools ensures that the coaching support GAs provide to teacher candidates reflects current issues and trends in education. Hiring GAs also allowed for maximized support in the field as coaching hours could be shifted to times of the day with the highest need since there were more people able to provide feedback.

Even with the decrease in full-time coaches and shift to graduate assistants, overall, the data shows a decrease in need for additional support at clinical practice. The increased time spent in the field with the support of instructional coaches improved the average pass rate to 97%.

Increased Time in Field and Instructional Coaching: The Impact on Third Space

With the implementation of additional field time and instructional coaching support, candidates were provided multiple supported opportunities to connect theory to practice. These experiences allowed candidates to apply their learning within a classroom setting. University faculty tied 30% of the course grade to performance in the field to ensure the complexities of teaching at one level were met before continuing to the next. The performance assessment at each level was scaled back from the one used at clinical practice, so the language and expectations stayed consistent and candidates were able to show improvement on the progressive rubric. Mentor teachers provided input in creating the rubrics as well as evaluating the performance of the candidates using the rubric at the end of each field experience.

Instructional coaches concentrated on providing support in early field experiences. Coaches were present in buildings four days a week throughout the duration of the field experience (i.e. six weeks). Coaches use multiple types of coaching methods including instructional coaching (Knight, 2007) and cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2015). Both types of coaching are centered on observing the candidates teaching and engaging in reflective conversations that prompt reflection and goal setting. These conversations also provide opportunities for candidates to ask questions or address concerns. Initial challenges with the implementation of instructional coaching were defining the role of the coach and helping candidates understand the coach's non-evaluative role. As candidates progressed through the program, the coach's role was defined more clearly, and coaches became trusted guides.

The consistent presence of instructional coaches and university faculty in the buildings provided more opportunities for continued conversations with partner schools/stakeholders and allowed mentor teachers to have a more consistent voice in the third space. University faculty (e.g.

instructors, instructional coaches) frequently checked in with mentor teachers to monitor candidates' progress and to help address questions or concerns in a timely manner.

Sustained Partnerships: The Impact on Third Space

The development of the third space opened lines of communication among the university and school partners to create shared goals for supporting teacher candidates. The continuation of conversations with stakeholders prompted changes for continued improvement and longevity of partnerships. Currently, the program partners with over 40 host schools to provide field-based experiences for pre-service teachers prior to clinical practice. The feedback from mentor teachers and teacher candidates reflects positive partnerships formed within the third space, shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Partner Feedback

Participant	Feedback
Mentor Teacher	I had a really great partnership with my practicum students as we were both able to grow from each other's ideas and thoughts! Our teaching practices and my classroom is better as a result of our partnership.
Mentor Teacher	The course instructors and instructional coach were available and introduced themselves. I knew I could have visited or asked them about anything that came up.
Mentor Teacher	I really enjoy working with UNO teacher candidates. I feel like I am able to learn just as much from them and the experience as they are. I appreciate the partnership.
Teacher Candidate	My mentor teacher has the bar set high, so having a conversation with my coach about her perception of things going well did make me feel better about my path so far.
Teacher Candidate	The partnership with [the school] was an incredible experience. I would highly recommend working with them again. My mentor teacher went above and beyond to support me as a student. The administration and school counselor were available to encourage us as students but most importantly, they treated us like staff! I can't say enough good things about my experience with [teacher] and the building.

Teacher Candidate	This was my favorite and best practicum because of the support I received from these professors. With the unknown season we are in, they offered so much support to us and always made sure to ask for feedback on what they could do better. They were all so helpful and I felt like I could come to them with questions because they made themselves available.

Reflection and Replication

In analyzing program data and qualitative feedback from the mentor teachers and teacher candidates participating in field-based experiences, the authors reflected on the initiatives that aided in the success creating third space and sustaining university and school partnerships. Teacher preparation programs might consider replicating the following practices to increase successful program completion and build partnerships with local schools.

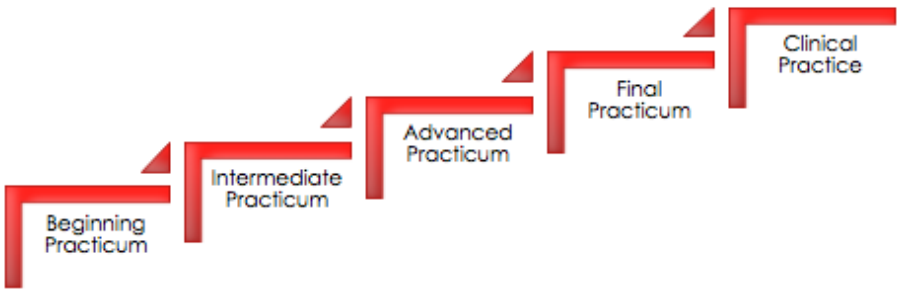
Increased time in field

In an effort to address the concerns expressed by partner schools and mitigate the number of candidates on assistance plans, the university turned their focus inward and examined the scope and sequence of the teacher preparation program. The Building Relevant, Integrated, Developmentally Guided Experiences for Students (BRIDGES) committee was formed, consisting of faculty representing the elementary and secondary methods courses, Office of Field Experiences personnel, and the Teacher Education department chair. The committee engaged in work to define key learning objectives in each course and audited courses for overlap in content and instructional practice.

As a result, BRIDGES developed a scope and sequence, scaffolding coursework and field-based experiences to build in time and complexity. Courses were blocked together and linked to the field-based experience time, just as a science class to a lab (Figure 2). This allowed for easier registration and placed candidates in the field a minimum of four days a week for three hour blocks of time. In other words, candidates were in the field more frequently for an increased amount of time. Seeing the progression of content in a typical school week helped candidates begin to understand the rhythm of classroom instruction. University faculty developed key assessments, including a field experience rubric which tied 30% of the candidates' overall grades to their field performance. In addition to candidates completing their field experiences in partner

schools during consistent blocks of time, this also allowed for instructional coaches to support candidates in the field. Course instructors and instructional coaches worked together to develop an instructional coaching calendar that allowed faculty to be a constant presence in P-12 buildings during field experiences.

Figure 2. Scope and sequence of field-based experience



Supporting partners and pre-service candidates: Instructional coaching

To support the need for guided and supervised field experiences, four instructional coaches were hired to work alongside course instructors and collaboratively develop and support experiences for candidates. The term instructional coach is multifaceted. Knight (2007) defined the role as "an onsite professional developer who works collaboratively with teachers, empowering them to incorporate research-based instructional methods into their classrooms in a non-evaluative role" (p. 12). A variety of roles and responsibilities can be assigned to instructional coaches; therefore, coaches do not adhere to a one-size-fits-all model. The model utilized at this metropolitan university allows candidates to learn theory at the university while having opportunities to apply this knowledge in a real-life classroom with the on-site support of an instructional coach.

Instructional coaches facilitate a synergistic environment that focuses on growing professionals through the use of collaboration, collective problem solving, decision-making, research, and reflection. Pre-service teachers complete the field experiences with the support of a P-12 mentor teacher, course instructors, and an instructional coach. Pre-service teachers need to understand why teachers take particular actions; communication needs to be explicit, exploratory, and reflective (Lawley et al., 2012; Zeichner, 2012). The instructional coach serves as a non-evaluative observer of teaching and a thought partner for the candidate to reflect on their teaching, grow in their practice, and meet course learning objectives.

Instructional coaches work closely with course instructors. The coaches attend classes with candidates, model co-teaching, and support candidate development of continuous self-assessment. This collaboration supports the coach in being well versed in the goals of the university which in turn allows them to advocate for pre-service teachers and serve as a liaison between the university and P-12 schools. Furthermore, given their presence within the buildings and the relationships with school partners, instructional coaches witness first-hand the culture of the building and can make concrete connections for candidates to course content. They understand classroom dynamics and can provide differentiated support for pre-service teachers and mentor teachers.

Collaboration in third space is a continual process, and open communication serves as the catalyst for these partnerships to thrive. Instructional coaches play an important role in field-based experiences, as they are an extension of the university and are visible within schools. In addition to supporting pre-service teachers in their learning while in the field, the instructional coach also serves as a resource for P-12 partner schools. The coach works collaboratively with the building administration as well as mentor teachers to ensure that university expectations are implemented and questions or concerns are addressed in a timely manner.

Prior to the field experience beginning, faculty and coaches meet with mentor teachers to share where the course falls in the scope and sequence, to review the objectives of the course, and to provide ideas of what the experience may look like for candidates. At times, mentor teachers may need guidance as to how the candidate can best be utilized. Other times, mentor teachers may need guidance on what the candidates are developmentally able to handle and how to support their development. Coaches are able to address concerns with the candidates, which allows the mentor teacher time to focus on the needs of P-12 students.

Sustained partnerships

At the conclusion of each field experience, debriefing sessions are scheduled between university faculty and P-12 partners. The purpose of these sessions is to celebrate successes from the semester and also to set future goals. Some of the debriefing sessions occur face-to-face, while others occur virtually. When scheduling the sessions, university faculty and personnel consider the needs and desires of P-12 teachers and accommodate accordingly. The same questions are asked of each partner school, and information is compiled and shared with all stakeholders. The following questions are addressed:

1. What were the positives of the experience?
2. What are your thoughts on the schedule/timing of the practicum experience?
3. Were the expectations for the practicum realistic?
4. What are your thoughts on the field rubric?

5. What can we do to better support you and your students?
6. What might make placements easier for districts/schools (if administration is present)?
7. Do you have any other feedback to improve our program?

The district and school debriefing sessions brought about important conversations regarding logistics of the experiences and best practices. The conversations allowed the P-12 teachers to have a voice in third space. Their insights into what is possible to accomplish in the five-week practicum, the logistics of the experience itself, and feedback on the assessment tool have been invaluable. The debriefing sessions prompted changes in certain field experiences to meet the needs of pre-service candidates, mentor teachers, and P-12 students.

In addition to the debriefing sessions, a survey was developed to ensure that all stakeholders could share their voice (i.e., pre-service teachers, mentor teachers, and building administrators). University instructors and the field experience personnel review the survey data and work directly with each building to make improvements to the experience for the next semester. Faculty cohorts set goals for the upcoming semester based on the feedback. These conversations continue each semester as a means of strengthening partnerships and meeting program goals.

Implications and Conclusion

Re-envisioning the program and the development of third space has strengthened partnerships with local school districts, allowing placements of approximately 1,000 pre-service candidates in over 40 elementary and secondary schools. Maintaining partnerships every semester allows for all parties to become familiar with the goals of the course, the developmental needs of candidates and P-12 students, and the culture of the building.

Third space offers opportunities to intentionally pair veteran (mentor) teachers with teacher candidates to share their craft and support the teacher candidates' pedagogical practices. Being mindful of the added workload mentoring can place on teachers, it is important consideration is given to not overusing mentor teachers and buildings. Therefore, as programs grow, a challenge they face is continuing to maintain existing partnerships while also forging new ones. The onboarding of new building partners takes time to establish. Beginning with initial conversations with district human resources offices, to meeting with building leaders and mentor teachers, inculcating teacher candidates into the classroom can take a year to establish.

Yet, this hard work pays off as this program experienced in the wake of a global pandemic. Established partnerships allowed for minimal interruptions to practicum experiences. As many educator preparation programs pressed pause on field experiences and moved to the use of video teaching, sustained partnerships allowed the university to pivot with partner schools to provide support in synchronous, asynchronous, and hyflex environments. Furthermore, the relationships

that existed between the school and the university allowed stakeholders to establish response plans and protocols that mirrored each other. Beyond supporting field-based experiences, school districts were able utilize teacher candidates that had met a threshold of practicum hours to help combat the substitute shortage providing teacher candidates with additional opportunities to gain experience.

Elements that have supported developing these partnerships in the teacher preparation program described in this article are the following:

1. **A shared vision:** setting up initial meetings with local schools to create a shared vision for our partnership by outlining goals of the course,
2. **Building orientations:** organizing building orientations for candidates to become part of the school community,
3. **Visibility and accessibility:** supporting candidates and mentor teachers with university faculty presence in buildings, and
4. **Soliciting feedback:** debriefing surveys and conversations with buildings at the conclusion of field experiences to make improvements to the experiences for next semester.

Collaboration in third space between P-12 districts and universities is necessary for candidates to learn, practice, and apply instructional strategies in classrooms. A focused approach nurtures the development of a professional vision (Zeichner, 2012). Increasing conversations and valuing district input leads to a growth model. Without collaboration in a third space, identifying needs, clarifying expectations and supporting all aspects of a field experience, the chasm between universities and PK-12 practitioners will continue to widen.

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