Field Experiences in an Urban Setting

Within the Child Development Programs of the City Colleges of Chicago, the term **“field experience”** includes observation hours without direct interaction with children that are required in varying amounts for each course in the program. In addition, the term includes the Practicum, which is comprised of 250 supervised student teaching hours in an early childhood setting. The Practicum requires a health and criminal background check, which is facilitated by the individual placement sites.

*Observation Assignments*

Students make their own arrangements to do the required observation hours for each course, but may ask their instructor for site recommendations. Students are encouraged to bring their syllabus and student ID to show to the Director of each site they intend to visit. Instructors may also send a letter, which describes the main purpose of the observation hours and confirmation that the named student is currently enrolled in the course, but also stresses that the director should follow his/her own center guidelines for visitors. We stress to our students that they must follow the rules of each ECE setting they visit. Some of the assignments leading up to the Practicum require that the students photograph samples of the work of young children, but they are instructed to never include identifying information about the child. Observation hours are not necessarily required to be done in a NAEYC accredited site. The goal of each set of observation assignments per course is to require students to do various observation activities within different types of settings:

·         observation/interpretation papers

·         teacher interviews

·         parent/child observations

·         environmental checklists

·         observations of different types of programs (Head Start, State PreK, private, faith-based,etc.)

·         case study of one child

·         focus on specific areas of a classroom including room setup and materials

·         teacher research projects students collect data in order to answer a specific research question

·         observations of children in different age ranges

*Practicum Placement*

Practicum placement sites must be **NAEYC accredited**. Students work with the Practicum instructor/coordinator to secure an approved student teaching placement. Practicum students collect signed permission letters to be completed by the Site Director/Principal. One of the requirements for the Practicum is that the college instructor will do site visits and videotape the student teacher interacting with young children. Student teachers must have appropriate permissions from the director in order to take photographs and video of the student teacher interacting with young children at the site. Direct images of children’s faces are avoided whenever possible. Student teachers are instructed on their ethical responsibility to protect the confidentiality of children as well as the Practicum site.

Student teachers are visited by the instructor. They are also **visited by a classmate** and each student does a visit at one classmates’ site. This is coordinated in order to assure that each student visits a site different from his/her own. Students complete evaluation forms describing their observations of a classmate.

Specific to an Urban Setting

Students often use **public transportation** to commute to and from placement sites. It can be difficult for them to coordinate transportation between home, work, Practicum site, and the college. This makes for very long days. Chicago is a city made up of many neighborhoods. Our students are familiar with their routes to and from the college, but may not have much experience venturing to different neighborhoods within the city and may feel anxious about traveling to an unfamiliar area.

Practicum placement sites are NAEYC accredited and must be approved by the Practicum instructor. Sometimes the placement site is located in a neighborhood that has a high incidence of **crime/violence**, which creates safety concerns.

In an urban setting public transportation does provide many opportunities for students to see different types of programs within the city limits. With planning and preparation, students will collect rich information from diverse settings in order to develop a more comprehensive picture of the field of ECE.

Many of our observation assignments include language logs and other **“found” observations** of young children in public places. There are many museums, parks, shopping areas, trains, buses, restaurants, etc. within walking distance of our campus that provide students with rich observational data they can bring back to the classroom to analyze, interpret, and discuss. We caution students not to *stalk* young children in public places, but to listen closely in a natural setting, and jot down brief observational notes in their log. The logs can focus on any of the domains of development, including play, and can provide students with diverse observational data to explore in a variety of ways.

*Considerations in Teacher Education*

Align the field experience assignment to **student learning outcomes** for the course and/or NAEYC Standards for Professional Preparation. There must be a clear learning outcome associated with each observational hour required so the purpose of each field experience is clear to students and to all stakeholders.

Include a variety of methods for students to use in order to collect data during field experiences: observation logs, developmental and environmental checklists, materials inventory, photo journal, classroom map, interview questions/summary, case study, play log, newsletter article based on observation, documentation panel, etc. Focus on specific areas of the setting: science, math, literacy, art, gross motor, etc. Focus on specific times of day: free play, lunch, transitions, outdoor play, drop-off/pick-up, meals, circle time, etc.

Work with the faculty team, college administration, and legal department to develop a clear **Field Experience Handbook** that defines field experience expectations and a clear process map describing the consequence when students do not meet expectations, particularly regarding a criminal background. We have an ethical responsibility to young children who are considered to be a vulnerable population. Child Development students must meet expectations within field experience guidelines in order to successfully complete the program. In addition, a self-assessment tool such as CARE self-assessment can be used help students self-assess their dispositional qualities, as well as a touchpoint for ongoing discussions with faculty about whether or not the student’s own dispositional and professional qualities are a good match for the field’s expectations. It is important to make this expectation and process visible to all stakeholders including students, faculty, administration, Student Services, and Advising.

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