Breaking the mold of K-12 classroom-based teaching and learning is what the University of British Columbia’s Teacher Education Community Field Experience is all about. Increasingly, educators are pursuing opportunities that take them beyond familiar school contexts into alternative, rural, international and non-school-based contexts. The focus on beginning a teaching career in a classroom similar to the one in which one was educated has expanded to a much broader view of where teaching and learning take place and also where a Bachelor of Education can lead.

In UBC’s recently reimagined BEd program, teacher candidates spend more time than ever in schools, with three practica (weekly day-long visits, two-week fall practicum, ten-week spring practicum). They also undertake a three-week community field experience (CFE) to broaden their concept of educational spaces and opportunities. In most cases, the CFE occurs outside of schools in placements hosted by community partners, while some take place in a school context that is very different from the practicum site (e.g., a secondary level candidate might spend three weeks in a Grade 1 classroom, library or resource room), in rural locations, or internationally.

The K-12 classroom is a crucially important educational context that provides the backbone of experience for preparing to teach, but there are other sites where education also takes place. The purpose of the community field experience is to expand and enrich the notion of where and how education occurs. Teacher candidates:

• spend time observing and working in a variety of educational settings;
• imagine aspects of non-formal, alternative or international education that might inform their classroom practice;
• recognize and articulate educational community and/or international links to local schools;
• develop questions to frame an inquiry into places of learning outside schools;
• demonstrate their inquiry and learning through a blog, journal or brief presentation.

Mwebi and Brigham posit that “preservice teachers, teachers, and others in schools, teacher education programs, and elsewhere have a collective responsibility to ensure that knowledge systems in teacher education are expanded.” Teacher candidates who have practicum experiences in alternative settings are likely to broaden their understanding of formal education and enhance their educational competencies and philosophies. Anderson, Lawson, and Mayer-Smith conducted a study of teacher candidates in a pilot community field experience in an aquarium setting. The researchers’ intent was to equip the candidates with skills that could be easily transferred across a variety of educational contexts. They concluded that teaching in unfamiliar or non-traditional environments can help educators develop a more holistic view of education. Benefits to the new teachers were both pragmatic – in developing new teaching skills as a consequence of adapting to the new context – and philosophical – in coming to know how individual and collective understandings are constructed.

Community-based contexts
UBC’s community partners welcome teacher candidates who have completed their final practicum to assist in co-creating and delivering educational programs and curriculum resources for school-age students, pre-school children, seniors, community members or others. The skills and dispositions that teacher candidates bring to these activities are appreciated by community partners, and the benefits to candidates include expanding their scope of where learning takes place in the wider world. Some examples of UBC community partnerships include:
• Arts-based settings, such as galleries, arts & music programs in schools, film study;
• Community service organizations, such as neighbourhood houses, animal shelters, youth detention centres;
• Early childhood education sites, such as daycare centres, pre-schools;
• Health and wellness centres, such as Dalai Lama Centre, health authority, kids’ cooking programs;
• Indigenous education centres, such as aboriginal health initiative, First Nations band schools;
• Independent, private and faith-based schools, learning centres and academies;
• Museums and cultural centres, archives, halls of fame, historical sites;
• Recreation and outdoor education sites, such as parks, gardens, camps;
• Science education sites, such as science or ecological centres, space centre, aquarium, marine centre;
• Special education programs and centres;
• Sustainability and environmental education sites, schools, projects, wilderness programs.

“I learned that I have a passion for teaching students in an outdoor setting and I gained several valuable hard skills that will hopefully assist me in one day constructing an outdoor classroom for future students... I felt reinvigorated as an educator by my CFE experiences.” - Teacher Candidate, Abbotsford Outdoor Education Program

“Your students are shining stars! They are a great addition to our team. They have jumped right into the program and have already created resources and materials to support our English Language learners! I feel so fortunate to be working with them and learning from them.”
- Coordinator, Engaged Immigrant Youth Program

Rural contexts
Rural teacher education is an important focus of UBC’s BEd program. Our 25-year program in the West Kootenays stresses place-based learning, a connection to community and sustainability. Rural placements for the CFE are selected by 40 percent of UBC’s nearly 600 teacher candidates. As McMurdo emphasizes in his explanation of his commitment to teaching in remote communities, it is important to prepare students “who can advocate for their communities and the planet, are capable of critical thinking, understand the social and economic contexts around them, and have the skills and creativity to help their communities grow.”

While the rural CFEs are largely school-based experiences, the connections to community organizations are strong, meaning that candidates have opportunities that extend well beyond the classroom walls for their own and their students’ learning. Placements are situated in eight rural school districts, from northern BC to western Vancouver Island to Haida Gwaii. As well, there are three camp locations associated with urban districts that provide place-based learning paralleling a rural context.

“My rural field experience was terrific for many different reasons. One reason is that it gave me the ability to compare and contrast two different educational systems. It wasn’t that one school or district was better than another but, rather, that the new experience allowed me to reflect on education in much more complex and useful ways.”
- Teacher candidate, rural school
Alternative school programs

Teacher candidates may spend three weeks in school settings that are different from the regular practicum context, such as a learning resource room, school library, adult basic education program or online distance-learning centre. These CFE placements provide a glimpse into contexts outside the regular classroom where students receive support and where different teacher-mentors can share their wisdom. Candidates who speak French may choose placements in Montreal or Quebec City, or in French immersion or Francophone schools in BC communities or Whitehorse.

“Participating in UBC’s community field experience was an extremely rewarding experience for me as a teacher candidate. To branch out and learn about different areas of education dramatically changed some of the ways I view pedagogy.”

- Teacher candidate, Alternative school

International contexts

Opportunities abound for teacher candidates able and willing to travel to Australia, Cuba, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Kenya, Mexico, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Uganda, United Kingdom or Switzerland. Research indicates that for teacher candidates, international experiences “increase their self-awareness, and enhance their personal efficacy and understanding of cross-cultural, diversity, and globalization issues, which informs their subsequent teaching practice.”

“The Ugandan people taught me the power of teaching in a local community with limited resources but the heart to persevere and overcome obstacles with undeniable faith and commitment! It was truly one of the best experiences that I have participated in.”

- Teacher candidate, international
Finally, UBC’s International Baccalaureate (IB) Educator stream within the Teacher Education Program opens up even more possibilities, in Canada and internationally, both during and after the BEd program. Teacher candidates in the IB stream engage with an international view of education in which the world serves as a broad context for inquiry, for learning and for action.

“It was amazing to see how dedicated these kids were to their craft. I taught band and found that they were really excited to be there. They were so interested in the material. They got a chance to inquire about the things they were curious about. I think it really played to their favour.”
- Teacher candidate, CFE in an IB Middle Years Programme school

**UBC’S TEACHER EDUCATION** program’s mission is to prepare local and global educators for a future where flexible educational programming and varied contexts will likely become more and more commonplace. As CFE coordinator Keith McPherson points out, the CFE provides a flexible learning model that encourages teacher candidates to take a leadership role by collaborating with their community partner to design engaging learning experiences for themselves and their students.

With the addition of opportunities afforded by the community field experience, preservice teachers can increase their conception of how and where children, youth and others learn within and beyond the classroom as they develop their capacity to be responsive, adaptable educators.

**More information:** cfe.educ.ubc.ca

**NOTES**

5. UBC offers Canada’s only International Baccalaureate Organization-recognized teacher education program.