

Clinical Experiences in Teacher Preparation

The SREB Teacher Preparation Commission June 2017 meeting will focus on issues surrounding clinical experiences. Speakers and sessions will address the components of effective clinical practice and highlight the terrain of experiences to orient Commission members to how the structure of clinical experiences matters in improving teaching.

Practice teaching in real classrooms is a hallmark of traditional teacher education. Prospective teachers need opportunities to rehearse skills from classroom management to explaining fractions, and clinical experiences such as student teaching provide opportunities to refine these skills with supervision and support. Multiple aspects of these experiences likely contribute to their results for teacher candidates and their future students: the school in which a prospective teacher is placed, the mentor teacher with whom the student teacher works, the links to coursework and university personnel, and the match between the student teaching experience and the kind of school in which a prospective teacher intends to teach the following year. The content and structure of clinical experiences is a potentially powerful lever for improving the overall teacher preparation experience. Indeed, providing teachers with high-quality clinical experiences is one of the few clear implications of the research on teacher preparation

Perhaps as a result, much recent innovation in teacher education has focused on clinical experiences. From urban teacher residencies to partnerships between university-based preparation programs and local districts, programs are experimenting with ways to better prepare novices for the schools and students in their local area.

The schools in which student teachers work carry enormous influence, as do the teachers who already work there, the tools and curricular resources available to them, and the students who populate the classrooms. Are these schools well-organized and supportive? Are there enough experienced instructors available to mentor newer teachers? Is there a strong school leader who promotes instructional coherence? Does the mentor teacher demonstrate high-quality teaching practice? Does the school promote a vision of instruction well-aligned with teacher education coursework? Research suggests that the answers to these questions are consequential for teacher effectiveness down the road.

Though some programs specify criteria to carefully place candidates in schools likely to foster their success, no states currently have policies in place that make such experiences the norm. Given the limited time teachers spend in preparation, programs would be well-served to think strategically about using student teaching to cultivate the knowledge and skills prospective teachers will need in the specific kinds of schools in which they anticipate working.

Several efforts currently underway will better define the most crucial elements of high-quality field experiences. For example, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education is working with local preparation programs to develop high-quality field experiences and measure their effects.

From the selection of mentor teachers to the schools in which prospective teachers are placed, various structural decisions influence the quality of the clinical experience. Successful clinical experiences hinge on effective collaboration between teacher preparation programs and the K-12 schools in which the clinical experiences happen. The keys to success are the conversations, working relationships and data sharing that result from these partnerships.