

Abstract Body – Paper 3

Assessing the Pre-service Clinical Practice Experiences of Practicing Teachers

Background / Context:

Recent emphasis on teacher effectiveness and accountability has led the education policy, research, and practitioner communities to take a closer look at the effectiveness of teacher preparation programs, motivated in large part by concerns about program quality. Several national- and state-level studies have found new teachers to be underprepared with respect to needed knowledge and skills, based on reports by school principals, education school faculty and deans, and program graduates themselves (Kihara, Graham, & Hawken, 2009; Levine, 2006; Missouri Schools of Education Research Project, 2005). For example, teachers in their first three years of teaching who graduated from 17 universities reported that they lacked knowledge and skills related to content pedagogy, lesson design and preparation, classroom management, and other aspects of teaching (Chesley & Jordan, 2012). Assessments of teacher preparation programs have also identified substantial diversity within and across traditional and alternative programs, including variation in curricula, pedagogical preparation, course requirements, textbook quality, faculty teaching assignments, and student teaching experiences (Greenberg, Pomerance, & Walsh, 2011; Greenberg, Walsh, & McKee, 2014; Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2014; Levine, 2006).

Members of REL Central’s Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance, including state education agency and teacher preparation program administrators and faculty, expressed the need for better information about the implementation and effectiveness of teacher preparation programming to guide policy and practice.

Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:

Given concerns about the variation in the clinical practice component of teacher preparation programs and evidence suggesting that this is an aspect of program implementation with potential to affect teacher and student outcomes, clinical practice is an area that warrants additional research. To address this need and support informational needs among members of REL Central’s Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance, this study was designed to collect descriptive data about this important aspect of teacher preparation. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of clinical practice in traditional teacher preparation programs completed by first-year public school teachers in Missouri?
2. How does clinical practice in traditional teacher preparation programs completed by first-year public school teachers in Missouri vary by certificate type?

This information is designed to inform conversations among state administrators in REL Central states about emerging state standards for teacher preparation, such as what constitutes minimum implementation of priority components. Findings from this study may also prompt teacher preparation program administrators in Missouri to engage in discussion about how to improve programs, by examining how their programs compare to others in the state.

As part of the study, REL Central developed the survey of clinical practice. The survey contained questions about first-year teachers' student teaching and field experiences in teacher preparation and was based on a set of key elements of clinical practice identified through a review of research and professional standards. The survey included measures of the following eight primary topic areas: (1) clinical placement characteristics; (2) clinical placement curriculum; (3) clinical placement timing; (4) cooperating teacher characteristics; (5) supervisor characteristics; (6) institution of higher education and P-12 school collaboration; (7) candidate evaluation and feedback; and (8) evaluation.

Setting:

First-year teachers who were trained in traditional undergraduate teacher preparation programs and taught in Missouri public schools during the 2014/15 academic year were asked to complete the survey. Responses were received from first-year teachers who completed teacher preparation programs at 37 of the 40 state-approved institutions that offered traditional undergraduate teacher preparation programs in Missouri. Institutions include public and private colleges and universities that ranged in size, with some graduating fewer than 10 per year and others graduating over 400 per year.

Population / Participants / Subjects:

Survey respondents included 856 first-year teachers who were trained in traditional undergraduate teacher preparation programs at 37 institutions of higher education.

Most respondents had certificates to teach in elementary grades (40 percent), followed by high school (23 percent), grades K-12 (21 percent), early childhood (11 percent) and middle school (9 percent). Among respondents with certificates to teach middle or high school, most had subject area certificates to teach English/language arts (43 percent), followed by social science (36 percent), mathematics (34 percent), and science (34 percent). Among respondents with K-12 certificates, most had certificates to teach music/arts (29 percent), followed by physical education/health (27 percent) and special education (21 percent).

Research Design:

This descriptive study is based on data from a survey of new teachers in Missouri. REL Central used a list of all practicing first-year, preK-12 teachers provided by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MO DESE) to identify potential survey respondents. All first-year preK-12 Missouri teachers who completed a traditional undergraduate teacher preparation program in the state were asked to respond to questions about their clinical practice experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Cognitive interviews, designed to improve the relevance and clarity of survey items and to minimize response error (Tourangeau, 1984; Willis, 1999), were conducted with a sample of

first-year teachers in Missouri in late 2013. Respondents were asked to first complete the survey online and then to participate in a web-based interview to discuss their responses. Retrospective verbal probing (Willis, 1999) was used to review the draft survey content with each respondent and collect feedback to clarify and improve item wording. Feedback from the pretest was used to revise the survey.

The online survey was administered during a 15-week period in spring 2015. Teachers were invited to complete the survey via email. Several follow-up contacts were made to encourage response, including a postcard, four email follow-ups, a paper survey mailed to the school address, and two phone calls.

Analysis of the information collected from the survey focused on describing clinical practice experiences of all respondents. Analyses also summarize experiences of first-year teachers with different grade level certificates (early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school), subject area certificates for middle and high school (English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social science) and subject area certificates for grades K-12 (special education, music/arts, and physical education/health). Confidential, institution-specific reports were created to allow teacher preparation providers (institutions of higher education) to compare survey responses for their program graduates relative to responses for all graduates in the state.

Findings / Results:

While analyses have been conducted, the report has not been released by IES. We anticipate the report will be released by IES in Spring 2016 so we may not be able to share findings at the time of the spring 2016 conference. This presentation will therefore focus on the following three topics:

1. ***Recent policy initiatives and research that motivated the study.*** The presentation will briefly summarize policy initiatives related to teacher preparation, including efforts by many institutions that offer teacher preparation to explore new models for clinical preparation and seek better information about current implementation of programs and their impact. New standards and evaluation models for teacher preparation programs that are designed to improve clinical practice (e.g., Meyer, Brodersen, & Linick, 2014) will also be discussed. The presentation will also discuss findings from recent quantitative studies that relate aspects of clinical practice to student and teacher outcomes (e.g., (Goldhaber, Krieg, & Theobald, 2014; Ingersoll, et al., 2014; Ronfeldt, 2012; Ronfeldt, Schwartz, & Jacob, 2014), highlighting the substantial limitations of the current research base.
2. ***How the survey of clinical practice was developed in collaboration with a research alliance.*** The presentation will discuss how a review of findings from research, professional standards, and existing surveys of teacher preparation program graduates were used to develop the survey. Ways in which members of REL Central's Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance (EERA) were engaged in development of the survey will also be discussed.

3. ***How a partnership with a state education agency was used to facilitate survey data collection.*** All aspects of the study were carried out in close collaboration with Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education staff. The presentation will discuss how this collaboration was used to: (1) collect cognitive interview data from a representative sample of first-year teachers; (2) identify teachers in the study sampling frame; (3) promote the study to encourage teachers to survey response; (4) collect data to facilitate analysis of non-response bias; and (5) disseminate institution-specific results to administrators of teacher preparation programs.
4. ***How confidential, institution-specific reports were used to inform educators at teacher preparation programs.*** Confidential, institution-specific reports were prepared to allow teacher preparation program administrators at a given institution of higher education to compare reported clinical practice experiences of their graduates to those of all graduates statewide. Reports were designed to highlight areas of program strength and weakness to inform policy and practice discussions related to program design and implementation. Excerpts of de-identified reports will be shared and anecdotal evidence of how these results were used by administrators at teacher preparation programs will be shared.

Should findings from the statewide survey be available to share at the time of the spring 2016 conference, these will also be shared.

Conclusions:

The survey of clinical practice is the first of its type, designed to systematically collect detailed information from the perspective of recent graduates about the extent to which their preparation experiences adhere to research-based practice and professional standards. Understanding the context for this research and how it was carried out in collaboration with a research alliance which includes state education agency staff, will help researchers consider how they may address similar questions. The collaborative process used in this study for survey development, data collection, and dissemination of findings offer a good model for researchers and educators who wish to engage in similar work.

Appendix A. References

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