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Strengthening Clinical Preparation: The Holy Grail of Teacher Education

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Efforts to improve teacher education have recently focused in on the importance of well-supervised clinical practice as a critical element of effective preparation. This article outlines the challenges to creating productive clinical experiences for prospective teachers, and identifies strategies that have been found successful in confronting these challenges. These include the development of professional development school relationships that strengthen practice in partner schools and the use of teacher performance assessments that focus attention on pulling together practical skills and providing feedback to candidates and programs.

The question of how to strengthen teacher education is increasingly at the forefront of U.S. education policymaking, as the demands on teachers to teach ever more challenging curriculum to ever more diverse learners continue to increase exponentially. Yet the means for doing this are largely invisible to many. As the National Academy of Education Committee on Teacher Education noted at the start of its report:

To a music lover watching a concert from the audience, it would be easy to believe that a conductor has one of the easiest jobs in the world. There he stands, waving his arms in time with the music, and the orchestra produces glorious sounds, to all appearances quite spontaneously. Hidden from the audience—especially from the musical novice—are the conductor’s abilities to read and interpret all of the parts at once, to play several instruments and understand the capacities of many more, to organize and coordinate the disparate parts, to motivate and communicate with all of the orchestra members. In the same way that conducting looks like hand-waving to the uninitiated, teaching looks simple from the perspective of students who see a person talking and listening, handing out papers, and giving assignments. Invisible in both of these performances are the many kinds of knowledge, unseen plans, and backstage moves—the skunkworks, if you will, that allow a teacher to purposefully move a group of students from one set of understandings and skills to quite another over the space of many months. (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 1)

A good part of the magic of teaching and of teacher education is how teachers come to integrate theory and practice in a way that allows them to become expert in making and enacting decisions to meet the very different needs of the children they serve. The “secret sauce” in teacher education appears not to be the structures adopted by programs (e.g., 4 year, 5 year, 5th year, or other). There

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seem to be more and less successful programs within each of these structural alternatives. For example, a study of seven teacher education programs that graduate extraordinarily well-prepared candidates—a judged by observations of their practice, administrators who hire them, and their own sense of preparedness and self-efficacy as teachers—found successful exemplars among 4-year, 5-year, and 1- to 2-year graduate-level programs, which suggests that program structure is not the determinative factor in predicting program success (Darling-Hammond, 2006b).

However, there is evidence that teachers learn different things from different programs and feel differentially well prepared for specific aspects of teaching (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002; Denton & Lacina, 1984), and certain program features appear to make a difference in candidates’ preparation.

**PROGRAM FEATURES THAT APPEAR TO MATTER**

The seven-program study just mentioned included public and private institutions offering undergraduate and graduate programs that ranged in size from dozens to hundreds of candidates, but all produced graduates who were extraordinarily well prepared from their first days in the classroom.1 The research team found that, despite outward differences, the programs had common features, including

- a common, clear vision of good teaching that permeates all coursework and clinical experiences, creating a coherent set of learning experiences;
- well-defined standards of professional practice and performance that are used to guide and evaluate coursework and clinical work;
- a strong, core curriculum, taught in the context of practice, grounded in knowledge of child and adolescent development and learning, an understanding of social and cultural contexts, curriculum, assessment, and subject matter pedagogy;
- extended clinical experiences—at least 30 weeks of supervised practicum and student teaching opportunities in each program—that are carefully chosen to support the ideas presented in simultaneous, closely interwoven coursework;
- extensive use of case methods, teacher research, performance assessments, and portfolio evaluation that apply learning to real problems of practice;
- explicit strategies to help students confront their own deep-seated beliefs and assumptions about learning and students and to learn about the experiences of people different from themselves; and
- strong relationships, common knowledge, and shared beliefs among school- and university-based faculty jointly engaged in transforming teaching, schooling, and teacher education. (Darling-Hammond, 2006b)

These features confront many of the core dilemmas of teacher education: the strong influence of the “apprenticeship of observation” candidates bring with them from their years as students

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1The seven institutions studied are Alverno College in Milwaukee, WI; Bank Street College in New York City; Trinity College in San Antonio, TX; University of California at Berkeley; University of Virginia in Charlottesville; University of Southern Maine; and Wheelock College in Boston, MA.
in elementary and secondary schools, the presumed divide between theory and practice, the limited personal and cultural perspectives all individuals bring to the task of teaching, and the difficult process of helping people learn to enact their intentions in complex settings. They help produce novice teachers who are able, from their first days in the classroom, to practice like many seasoned veterans, productively organizing classrooms that teach challenging content to very diverse learners with levels of skill many teachers never attain.

These findings are similar to those of a recent New York City study that evaluated the contributions to value-added student achievement in English language arts and mathematics of beginning elementary teachers from different teacher education programs. The researchers examined the features of the most effective programs, by this standard, and found that, in addition to strong faculty, they included strong practical elements:

- More coursework in content areas (e.g., math and reading) and in content-specific methods of teaching.
- A focus on helping candidates learn specific practices that they apply in classrooms where they are practicing teaching alongside their coursework.
- Carefully selected student teaching experiences, well-matched to the contexts in which candidates will later teach.
- Opportunities to study the local district curriculum.
- A capstone project—typically a portfolio of work done in classrooms with students.

Other studies reinforce these findings. For example, many studies suggest that candidates who have more opportunity to study and apply subject-specific teaching methods are more effective (Begle, 1979; Druva & Anderson, 1983; Ferguson & Womack, 1993; Lustick & Sykes, 2006; Monk, 1994; Monk & King, 1994). Furthermore, teachers who have participated in targeted learning opportunities on effective teaching practices in specific content areas, with immediate opportunities to apply these practices, have produced student achievement gains that were significantly greater than those of comparison group teachers (Angrist & Lavy, 2001; Ebmeier & Good, 1979; Lawrenz & McCreath, 1988).

**AREAS OF FOCUS FOR MORE POWERFUL PREPARATION PROGRAMS**

Such powerful teacher education, I believe, rests on certain critically important pedagogical cornerstones that have been difficult to attain in many programs since teacher education moved from normal schools into universities in the 1950s. I highlight three of these here, because I think they are essential to achieving radically different outcomes from preparation programs.

**Coherence and Integration**

The first is a tight coherence and integration among courses and between coursework and clinical work in schools that challenges traditional program organizations, staffing, and modes of operation. The extremely strong coherence extraordinary programs have achieved creates an almost
seamless experience of learning to teach. In contrast to the many critiques that have highlighted
the structural and conceptual fragmentation of traditional undergraduate teacher education pro-
grams (see, e.g., Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990; Howey & Zimpher, 1989; Zeichner & Gore,
1990), coursework in highly successful programs is carefully sequenced, based on a strong theory
of learning to teach; courses are designed to intersect with each other and are aggregated into
a well-understood landscape of learning; and they are tightly interwoven with the advisement
process and students’ work in schools.

Subject matter learning is brought together with content pedagogy through courses that treat
them together; program sequences also create cross-course links. Faculty plan together and syllabi
are shared across university divisions as well as within departments. Virtually all of the closely
interrelated courses involve applications in classrooms where observations or student teaching
occur. These classrooms, in turn, are selected because they model the kind of practice that is
discussed in courses and advisement. In some particularly powerful programs, faculty who teach
courses also supervise and advise teacher candidates, and sometimes even teach children and
teachers in placement schools, bringing together these disparate program elements through an
integration of roles.

In such intensely coherent programs, core ideas are reiterated across courses and the theo-
retical frameworks animating courses and assignments are consistent across the program. These
frameworks “explicate, justify, and build consensus around such fundamental conceptions as
the role of the teacher, the nature of teaching and learning, and the mission of the school in
this democracy” enabling “shared faculty leadership by underscoring collective roles as well as
individual course responsibilities” (Howey & Zimpher, 1989, p. 242).

Programs that are largely a collection of unrelated courses without a common conception
of teaching and learning have been found to be relatively feeble change agents for affecting
practice among new teachers (Zeichner & Gore, 1990). Cognitive science affirms that people
learn more effectively when ideas are reinforced and connected both in theory and in practice.
Although this seems obvious, creating coherence has been difficult in teacher education because
of departmental divides, individualistic norms, and the hiring of part-time adjunct instructors in
some institutions that have used teacher education as a “cash cow” rather than an investment in our
nation’s future. Fortunately, a number of studies of teacher education reform have documented
how programs have overcome the centrifugal forces that leave candidates on their own to make
sense of disparate, unconnected experiences (Howey & Zimpher, 1989; Patterson, Michelli, &

**Explicit Links Between Theory and Practice**

The second critically important feature that requires a wrenching change from traditional models
of teacher education is the importance of extensive and intensely supervised clinical work—tightly
integrated with coursework—that allows candidates to learn from expert practice in schools that
serve diverse students. All of the adjectives in the previous sentence matter: “Extensive” clinical
work, “intensive” supervision, “expert” modeling of practice, and “diverse” students are all
critical to allowing candidates to learn to practice in practice with students who call for serious
teaching skills (Ball & Cohen, 1999), and securing these features is what will take radical
overhaul of the status quo. Furthermore, to be most powerful, this work needs to incorporate
newly emerging pedagogies—such as close analyses of learning and teaching, case methods, performance assessments, and action research—that link theory and practice in ways that theorize practice and make formal learning practical.

One of the perennial dilemmas of teacher education is how to integrate theoretically based knowledge that has traditionally been taught in university classrooms with the experience-based knowledge that has traditionally been located in the practice of teachers and the realities of classrooms and schools. Traditional versions of teacher education have often had students taking batches of front-loaded coursework in isolation from practice and then adding a short dollop of student teaching to the end of the program—often in classrooms that did not model the practices that had previously been described in abstraction. By contrast, the most powerful programs require students to spend extensive time in the field, examining and applying the concepts and strategies they are simultaneously learning about in their courses alongside teachers who can show them how to teach in ways that are responsive to learners.

Such programs typically require at least a full academic year of student teaching under the direct supervision of one or more teachers who model expert practice with students who have a wide range of learning needs, with the candidate gradually assuming more independent responsibility for teaching. This allows prospective teachers to grow “roots” on their practice, which is especially important if they are going to learn to teach in learner-centered ways that require diagnosis, adaptations to learners’ needs, intensive assessment and planning, and a complex repertoire of practices, judiciously applied.

Many teacher educators have argued that novices who have experience in classrooms are more prepared to make sense of the ideas that are addressed in their academic work and that student teachers see and understand both theory and practice differently if they are taking coursework concurrently with fieldwork. A growing body of research confirms this belief, finding that teachers-in-training who participate in fieldwork alongside coursework are better able to understand theory, to apply concepts they are learning in their coursework, and to support student learning (Denton, 1982; Henry, 1983; Koerner, Rust, & Baumgartner, 2002; Ross, Hughes, & Hill, 1981; Sunal, 1980). Other work suggests that candidates’ learning is influenced by the care with which placements are chosen, the quality of practice that is modeled, and the quality and frequency of mentoring (Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1985; Knowles & Hoefer, 1989; LaBoskey & Richert, 2002; Rodriguez & Sjostrom, 1995).

In addition, the quality and intensity of supervision, and the evaluation tools used to guide supervision, are factors that may be potentially important elements of teacher learning. The match between placements in which candidates learn to teach and their eventual teaching assignments—in terms of the type of students, grade level, and subject matter—appear to be associated with stronger teaching in the early years (Koerner et al., 2002). Some research also suggests that the duration of student teaching experiences may influence teachers’ later teaching practice and self-confidence (Chin & Russell, 1995; Denton & Lacina, 1984; Denton, Morris, & Tooke, 1982; Denton & Smith, 1983; Denton & Tooke, 1981; Koerner et al., 2002; LaBoskey & Richert, 2002; Orland-Barak, 2002; Sumara & Luce-Kaplar, 1996).

It is not just the availability of classroom experience that enables teachers to apply what they are learning, however. Recent studies of learning to teach suggest that immersing teachers in the materials of practice and working on particular concepts using these materials can be particularly powerful for teachers’ learning. Analyzing samples of student work, teachers’ plans and assignments, videotapes of teachers and students in action, and cases of teaching and learning
can help teachers draw connections between generalized principles and specific instances of teaching and learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, & Shulman, 2002; Lampert & Ball, 1998).

It is worth noting that many professions, including law, medicine, psychology, and business, help candidates bridge the gap between theory and practice—and develop skills of reflection and close analysis—by engaging them in the reading and writing of cases. Many highly successful teacher education programs require candidates to develop case studies on students, on aspects of schools and teaching, and on families or communities by observing, interviewing, examining student work, and analyzing data they have collected. Proponents argue that cases support both systematic learning from particular contexts as well as from more generalized theory about teaching and learning. Shulman (1996) suggested that cases are powerful tools for professional learning because they require professionals in training to move up and down, back and forth, between the memorable particularities of cases and the powerful generalizations and simplifications of principles and theories. Principles are powerful but cases are memorable. Only in the continued interaction between principles and cases can practitioners and their mentors avoid the inherent limitations of theory-without-practice or the equally serious restrictions of vivid practice without the mirror of principle. (p. 201)

These benefits of connecting profession-wide knowledge to unique contexts can also be gained by the skillful use of tools like portfolios; teachers’ classroom inquiries and research; and analyses of specific classrooms, teachers, or teaching situations when teacher educators provide thoughtful readings, guidance, and feedback.

Although it is helpful to experience classrooms and analyze the materials and practices of teaching, it is quite another thing to put ideals into action. Often, the clinical side of teacher education has been fairly haphazard, depending on the idiosyncrasies of loosely selected placements with little guidance about what happens in them and little connection to university work. And university work has often been “too theoretical”—meaning abstract and general—in ways that leave teachers bereft of specific tools to use in the classroom. The theoretically grounded tools teachers need are many, ranging from knowledge of curriculum materials and assessment strategies to techniques for organizing group work and planning student inquiries—and teachers need opportunities to practice with these tools systematically.

Powerful teacher education programs have a clinical curriculum as well as a didactic curriculum. They teach candidates to turn analysis into action by applying what they are learning in curriculum plans, teaching applications, and other performance assessments that are organized around professional teaching standards. These attempts are especially educative when they are followed by systematic reflection on student learning in relation to teaching and accompanied by feedback, with opportunities to retry and continue to improve. Furthermore, recent research suggests that, to be most productive, these opportunities for analysis, application, and reflection should derive from and connect to both the subject matter and the students who are taught (Ball & Bass, 2000; Grossman & Stodolsky, 1995; Shulman, 1987). In this way, prospective teachers learn the fine-grained stuff of practice in connection to the practical theories that will allow them to adapt their practice in a well-grounded fashion, innovating and improvising to meet the specific classroom contexts they later encounter.
New Relationships With Schools

Finally, these kinds of strategies for connecting theory and practice cannot succeed without a major overhaul of the relationships between universities and schools that ultimately produce changes in the content of schooling as well as teacher training. It is impossible to teach people how to teach powerfully by asking them to imagine what they have never seen or to suggest they “do the opposite” of what they have observed in the classroom. No amount of coursework can, by itself, counteract the powerful experiential lessons that shape what teachers actually do. It is impractical to expect to prepare teachers for schools as they should be if teachers are constrained to learn in settings that typify the problems of schools as they have been—where isolated teachers provide examples of idiosyncratic, usually atheoretical practice that rarely exhibits a diagnostic, assessment-oriented approach and infrequently offers access to carefully selected strategies designed to teach a wide range of learners well.

These settings simply do not exist in large numbers—and where individual teachers have created classroom oases, there have been few long-lasting reforms to leverage transformations in whole schools. Some very effective partnerships, however, have helped to create school environments for teaching and teacher training—through professional development schools (PDS), lab schools, and school reform networks—that are such strong models of practice and collaboration that the environment itself serves as a learning experience for teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2005; Trachtman, 1996). In such schools, teachers are immersed in strong and widely shared cultural norms and practices and can leverage them for greater effect through professional studies offering research, theory, and information about other practices and models. Such schools also support advances in knowledge by serving as sites where practice-based and practice-sensitive research can be carried out collaboratively by teachers, teacher educators, and researchers.

In highly developed professional development school models, curriculum reforms and other improvement initiatives are supported by the school and often the district; school teams involving both university and school educators work on such tasks as curriculum development, school reform, and action research; university faculty are typically involved in teaching courses and organizing professional development at the school site and may also be involved in teaching children; school-based faculty often teach in the teacher education program. Most classrooms are sites for practica and student teaching placements, and cooperating teachers are trained to become teacher educators, often holding meetings regularly to develop their mentoring skills. Candidates learn in all parts of the school, not just individual classrooms; they receive more frequent and sustained supervision and feedback, and participate in more collective planning and decision making among teachers at the school (Abdal-Haqq, 1998, pp. 13–14; Darling-Hammond, 2005; Trachtman, 1996).

Some universities have sought to create PDS relationships in schools that are working explicitly on an equity agenda, either in new schools designed to provide more equitable access to high-quality curriculum for diverse learners or in schools where faculty are actively confronting issues of tracking, poor teaching, inadequate or fragmented curriculum, and unresponsive systems (see, e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2005; Guadarrama, Ramsey, & Nath, 2002). In these schools, student teachers or interns are encouraged to participate in all aspects of school functioning, ranging from special education and support services for students to parent meetings, home visits, and community outreach to faculty discussions and projects aimed at ongoing improvement in students’ opportunities to learn. This kind of participation helps prospective teachers...
understand the broader institutional context for teaching and learning and begin to develop the
d skills needed for effective participation in collegial work around school improvement throughout
their careers.

Developing sites where state-of-the-art practice is the norm is a critical element of strong
teacher education, and it has been one of the most difficult. Quite often if novices are to see and
emulate high-quality practice, especially in schools serving the neediest students, it is necessary
not only to seek out individual cooperating teachers but to develop the quality of the schools
so that prospective teachers can learn productively and to create settings where advances in
knowledge and practice can continue to occur. Seeking diversity by placing candidates in schools
serving low-income students or students of color that suffer from the typical shortcomings many
such schools face can actually be counterproductive. As Gallego (2001) noted,

Though teacher education students may be placed in schools with large, culturally diverse student
populations, many of these schools . . . do not provide the kind of contact with communities needed to
overcome negative attitudes toward culturally different students and their families and communities
(Zeichner, 1992). Indeed, without connections between the classroom, school, and local communities,
classroom field experiences may work to strengthen pre-service teachers’ stereotypes of children,
rather than stimulate their examination (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Haberman & Post, 1992), and ulti-
mately compromise teachers’ effectiveness in the classroom. (Zeichner, 1996). (p. 314)

Thus, working to create professional development schools that construct state-of-the-art prac-
tice in communities where students are typically underserved by schools helps transform the
eventual teaching pool for such schools and students. In this way, PDSs develop school practice
as well as the individual practice of new teacher candidates. Such PDSs simultaneously restruc-
ture school programs and teacher education programs, redefining teaching and learning for all
members of the profession and the school community.

Although not all of the more than 1000 school partnerships (Darling-Hammond & Bransford,
2005) created in the name of PDS work have been successful, there is growing evidence of
the power of this approach. Studies polling employers and supervisors showed graduates of
highly developed PDSs were viewed as much better prepared than other new teachers (Hayes &
Weatherill, 1996; Mantle-Bromley, 2002). Veteran teachers working in highly developed PDSs
have reported changes in their own practice and improvements at the classroom and school levels
as a result of the professional development, action research, and mentoring that are part of the
PDS (Crow, Stokes, Kauchak, Hobbs, & Bullough, 1996; Jett-Simpson, Pugach, & Whipp, 1992;
Trachtman, 1996).

Comparison group studies have found that PDS-prepared teachers are rated stronger in various
areas of teaching, ranging from classroom management and uses of technology to content area
A small set of studies has documented gains in student performance and achievement tied
directly to curriculum and teaching interventions resulting from the professional development
and curriculum work professional development schools have undertaken with their university
partners (e.g., Fischetti & Larson, 2002; Frey, 2002; Glaeser, Karge, Smith, & Weatherill, 2002;
Houston et al., 1995; Judge, Carrideo, & Johnson, 1995; Wiseman & Cooner, 1996).

Although research has also demonstrated how difficult these partnerships are to enact, many
schools of education are moving toward preparing all of their prospective teachers in such
settings, both because they can more systematically prepare prospective teachers to learn to teach
in professional learning communities and because such work is a key to changing schools so that they become more productive environments for the learning of all students and teachers.

POLICY SUPPORTS FOR STRENGTHENING PREPARATION

Policies that would dramatically improve teacher quality need to include effective incentives for recruiting, retaining, and distributing teachers to the places where they are needed (for examples, see Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003) as well as professional policies governing accreditation, licensure, and advanced certification that encourage schools of education to adopt the kinds of connected coursework and clinical experiences that enhance teachers’ capacities and effectiveness.

To focus attention on the critical role of clinical preparation, among the most promising policies are supports for teacher evaluation strategies—such as standards-based teacher performance assessments like those of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the Performance Assessment for California Teachers, and the recently developed edTPA—that have been found not only to measure features of teaching associated with effectiveness (see, e.g., Bond, Smith, Baker, & Hattie, 2000; Cavaluzzo, 2004; Goldhaber & Anthony, 2007; Vandenvoort, Amrein-Beardsley, & Berliner, 2004) but actually to help develop classroom effectiveness at the same time. Particularly useful are those approaches that develop both greater teaching skill and understanding for the participants and for those involved in mentoring and assessing these performances. These approaches may be particularly valuable targets for policy investments, as they may provide an engine for developing teaching quality across the profession—by contributing to program improvement and to measures of how teachers contribute to student learning.

The assessments require teachers to document their plans and teaching for a unit of instruction, videotape and analyze lessons, and collect and evaluate evidence of student learning. Like the National Board assessments, beginning teachers’ ratings on the Connecticut BEST assessment have been found to significantly predict their students’ value-added achievement on the state reading tests (Wilson, Hallam, Moss, & Pecheone, 2014).

Meanwhile, in California, the state legislature requires all traditional and alternative preparation programs to evaluate candidates using a teacher performance assessment, which is used both to determine licensing and—when scores are aggregated—to evaluate programs for accreditation purposes. The Performance Assessment for California Teachers (PACT) was developed by 12 public and private universities in 2002 when the state legislature required that all candidates be licensed through a performance assessment. It asks candidates to plan a unit of instruction, adapt the plans for English learners and students with disabilities, and track 3 to 5 days of instruction. Candidates discuss how and why the plans are revised as teaching unfolds, submit a continuous video clip of a teaching segment, and collect and analyze evidence of student learning. Candidates also describe and show how they develop students’ language proficiency and academic language in the discipline.

Together these tasks, conducted over 1 week of instruction, provide vivid evidence of what beginning teachers can do in enacting the fundamental elements of teaching. The PACT is scored by faculty members, instructors, supervisors, and cooperating teachers using standardized rubrics in moderated sessions following training, with an audit procedure to calibrate standards.
Faculties use the PACT results to revise their curriculum. Like the National Board assessments, these promise to have learning effects that may affect the system more broadly, through the learning that occurs for assessors as well as for candidates (Darling-Hammond, 2006a). For example, participants report the following:

For me the most valuable thing was the sequencing of the lessons, teaching the lesson, and evaluating what the kids were getting, what the kids weren’t getting, and having that be reflected in my next lesson . . . the ‘teach-assess-teach-assess-teach-assess’ process. And so you’re constantly changing—you may have a plan or a framework that you have together, but knowing that that’s flexible and that it has to be flexible, based on what the children learn that day. (Prospective teacher)

This [scoring] experience . . . has forced me to revisit the question of what really matters in the assessment of teachers, which—in turn—means revisiting the question of what really matters in the preparation of teachers. (Teacher education faculty member)

[The scoring process] forces you to be clear about “good teaching;” what it looks like, sounds like. It enables you to look at your own practice critically, with new eyes. (Cooperating teacher)

As an induction program coordinator, I have a much clearer picture of what credential holders will bring to us and of what they’ll be required to do. We can build on this. (Induction program coordinator)

More than 30 universities and alternative programs now use the assessment, which has been shown to be reliable, valid, and a strong lever for improving both teacher competence and program quality (Pecheone & Chung, 2006). Like the Connecticut BEST assessment, validity studies of PACT have also found that teachers’ scores on the assessment are positively associated with their value-added effectiveness when they later become full-time teachers (Darling-Hammond, Newton, & Wei, 2012; Newton, 2010). These performance assessments also help beginning teachers improve their practice in ways that continue after the assessment experience has ended (Chung, 2008; Pecheone & Stansbury, 1996).

Based on this work, more than 20 states recently joined together as a Teacher Performance Assessment Consortium under the auspices of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education to create a common initial licensing assessment that can be used nationwide to make preparation and licensing more performance based. These states, along with more than 1,000 teachers and teacher educators nationwide in a process orchestrated by practitioners and researchers at Stanford University, have developed the edTPA. The nationally available edTPA was field tested in 2012–13 with more than 12,000 candidates in 26 states and 160 institutions of higher education and is under consideration or has been adopted for licensure or program approval in many of these states.

Like the National Board and the PACT assessments before it, candidates and teacher educators report that this process strengthens their practice. In Ohio, when 32 institutions piloted edTPA and studied the outcomes, 96% of teacher candidates report feeling positively about the experience, pointing especially to how it made them more self-aware and focused them on student learning (Hanby, 2011). As one observed,

[It helped me] because I was analyzing student learning and developing lessons that met the needs of each individual student. It helped me develop lessons that were within the students’ ability level, but pushed them to think more in depth.

For more information, see http://edtpa.aacte.org/resources
Teacher educators felt they learned as well. As one put it,

It forced the teacher candidates to examine what they were doing as beginning teachers. It also forced me to look at the materials that I was including in my seminar and the relevance of these materials to my students.

Similar conversations occurred across the eight Tennessee universities piloting the assessment. Marcy Singer Gabella, teacher education director at Vanderbilt University, describes how instructors revised coursework and field assignments to strengthen learning opportunities when the assessment revealed that candidates had difficulty analyzing student work and giving students usable feedback. Vanderbilt graduate Nicole Renner remarked that the TPA changed her teaching by refocusing her from herself—where most beginners start—to the students. Renner (2012) noted,

Even though the TPA is used for summative assessment, it is also formative, and the main lesson of the TPA is exactly what new and pre-service teachers need to learn: ‘It’s about the students, dummy!’ The TPA process shape(s) the candidate’s field experience (so that the) focus (is) entirely on students. Yes, we videotape lessons, and we refer to that as ‘videotaping ourselves,’ but what we are really trying to capture on that tape is our ability to foster a student-centered learning experience.

Similarly, Stephanie Wittenbrink (2013), a student teacher studying special education in Washington state, described the “radical perspective shift” (p. 1) she experienced as part of the first class of edTPA candidates, noting, “I was better prepared to teach because of the steps required by edTPA.” She argued, “All student teachers should complete such a classroom- and performance-based assessment. The field needs it and students deserve it” (p. 1).

CONCLUSION

Strengthening clinical practice in teacher preparation is clearly one of the most important strategies for improving the competence of new teachers and the capacity of the teaching force as a whole. As teacher educators consider how to accomplish this now-consensual goal, it will be important to take up, simultaneously, the other factors that will determine the success of this work. At minimum, these include creating a coherent vision and curriculum within and across the coursework and clinical components of the program, developing tasks and analytic opportunities that connect theory and practice, establishing school partnerships that are designed to support exemplary practice and pedagogical learning for teaching diverse learners, and incorporating strategies for assessing beginners’ capacity to practice—and informing ongoing program improvement—through sophisticated and educative assessments of what candidates can actually do when they are ready to enter the profession.

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