

## Field and Clinical Experiences Leave Teachers Ill-Prepared for the Realities of Inclusive Classrooms

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**Brianna J. Fankhauser****Abstract**

Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) incorporated various clinical-based experiences to introduce teacher candidates to authentic instructional practices and prepare teacher candidates to work with diverse populations (Stobaugh & Everson, 2020). After receiving a clinically based education, new teachers struggled with transitioning into their first classroom. They found themselves ill-prepared for their first teaching experience when confronted with the reality of daily classroom affairs, such as classroom management, curriculum, lesson planning, time management, and instructional materials (Morgan et al., 2020; Nunley, 2020). This exploratory qualitative study aimed to examine how teachers' perceptions of their field and clinical experiences prepared them for their first years of teaching in an inclusive classroom. The study revealed that participants' field and clinical experience did not prepare them to teach in an inclusive classroom. The findings indicated that teacher candidates need extended clinical experiences within varied and diverse settings that provide ample opportunities to work with diverse students under the guidance of knowledgeable and willing cooperating teachers.

**Keywords**

field experiences; preservice teacher education; lack special education pedagogy; behavior management training; ill-prepared for classrooms

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## Introduction

Educator Preparation Programs (EPP) play a vital role in preparing teacher candidates for their future profession through accredited curriculum and authentic classroom experiences (Pfannenstiel, 2017). EPPs incorporated various clinical-based experiences to introduce teacher candidates to authentic instructional practices to prepare teacher candidates to work with diverse populations (Stobaugh & Everson, 2020). Clinically based educator preparation purported to create extensive opportunities for teacher candidates to connect what they learned throughout their coursework with the challenge of using it in a classroom under the tutelage of skilled clinical educators (DESE, 2020). After receiving a clinically based education, new teachers struggled with transitioning into their first classroom. They found themselves ill-prepared for their first teaching experience when they were confronted with the reality of daily classroom affairs such as classroom management, curriculum, lesson planning, time management, and instructional materials (Morgan et al., 2020; Nunley, 2020). With concerns about program quality and the under preparedness of new teachers, EPPs had begun to explore new models for field experiences and sought more information about programs and their impact (Meyer, 2016). The research highlighted a need for EPPs to discuss what skills and competencies were needed by future teachers related to the education of students with disabilities (Swindlehurst et al., 2019).

In addition to exploring new models for field experiences and seeking more information about their program's impact, it was essential for EPPs to consider how they were preparing their teaching candidates to work with diverse learners. Twenty-first-century educators were expected to meet the wide range of learning, language, and behavioral needs in the general education setting (Hooks et al., 2019). Administrators consistently sought teachers with the ability to manage a well-designed environment and construct and teach quality lessons while meeting students' diverse needs (Grizzle, 2018). Research suggested that teachers must understand the learners within their classrooms and utilize best practices to engage diverse students in their learning (McBain, 2018).

In 2020, researchers found that there was an emphasis on restructuring educator preparation programs (Sarnoff & Ellerbrock, 2020). Researchers and practitioners identified the quality of field experiences as an area of concern that needed to be better supported and more clearly defined to meet the challenges of twenty-first-century classrooms (Meyer, 2016) and with 21<sup>st</sup> century pressures for EPPs to prepare effective teachers, teacher educators must question traditional models of student teaching (Emerson et al., 2018).

Although new teacher programs are in place within many districts to help support new teachers, it was important that EPPs were evaluating their effectiveness in setting up teacher candidates for success. Evidence suggested that the variations in field experience and program implementation affect teacher-candidate outcomes, making it essential to provide information that can inform preparation program administrators about improvement opportunities (Meyer, 2016). The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers' perceptions of their field and clinical experiences prepared them for their first years of teaching.

## Theoretical Framework

The Situated Learning Theory (SLT) provided the theoretical framework for this study. The field and clinical experience allowed teacher candidates to develop their skills through ongoing

collaboration with a community of mentors (Alexander, 2019). SLT, presented by Jean Lave and Etienne Wegner (1991), explains the process and development of learning when individuals participate in a community of practice. SLT emphasizes learning because of people's actions in relation to others (Lave & Wagner, 1991). Additional concepts within SLT included the environment in which the situated aspect of learning occurs, the novice who will learn from the experts around them, and the experts who know about the subject to be learned (Mina-Herrera, n.d.). Individual cognitive processes and the degree to which those processes are transferred to different situations are impacted by participating in instructional events within the classroom community (Cobb & Bowers, 1999). This notion was why it was important for this study to consider how situations within the field and clinical experience impact the teacher candidate's ability to transfer their learned skills into their first years of teaching.

This study explored a community of practice that pertained to the setting where the learning occurred. Specifically, the community of practice included the expert collaboration and tutelage teacher candidates receive. During a teacher candidates' field and clinical experience, they are surrounded by several experts, including university supervisors, faculty, and the K-12 cooperating teachers. This study examined the teacher candidates' relationship with those experts. The Researcher gathered information to determine what interactions between the teacher candidates and experts in the community of practice had a significant impact in preparing the teacher candidate to enter the field as perceived by pre-service teachers. The study also explored the setting where the learning occurred, including the field and clinical experiences in K-12 schools at the early, mid, and culminating levels within an EPP. Lastly, the study explored the teacher candidates' activities within their field and clinical experiences that have impacted their development toward becoming an educator.

## **Literature Review**

The field and clinical experience embedded within an Educator Preparation Program (EPP) played a vital role in preparing future educators for their first years of teaching through an accredited curriculum and authentic classroom experience (Pfannenstiel, 2017). Teacher candidates applied many theories and strategies they learned throughout their EPP to real students in an authentic setting. Research showed that many new teachers struggled with transitioning into their first teaching position because they found themselves ill-prepared for the first classroom (Nunley, 2020). Attrition rates of teachers with little preparation were two to three times higher than those who had comprehensive preparation before entering the profession (Sutcher, 2016). While attrition rates of educators were concerning, many traditional practices within the field and clinical experience remained unchanged (Fraser & Watson, 2014). In a study conducted on the field experiences within Midwestern EPPs, approximately one out of four teachers reported never, rarely, or occasionally applying the pedagogy they learned in EPP courses, and the same percentage disagreed that they were able to focus on their field experiences without being distracted by other program commitments (Meyer, 2016). This literature review delves into EPP reform efforts by reviewing accountability systems and EPP standards as well as a deeper dive into the development of the inclusive classroom is summarized along with teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to adequately enter and teach an inclusive classroom.

## Policies and Standards

Reform efforts resulted in the development of accountability systems and standards that shifted control from local EPPs to national authorities (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018b). Leaders of teacher education's major professional organizations created new assessment and accountability tools to reform the teaching profession (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018b). Two of the most prominent accountability tools included the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) accreditation standards and the Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA), a national assessment widely used to evaluate the performance of teacher candidates in the United States (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018a). Accreditation bodies and educative assessments provided EPPs parameters for accountability but also for innovation (Castro & Edwards, 2021). While the CAEP accreditation procedures and edTPA were described by their organizations to renew public confidence and promote uniform and universal standards and measures (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018a), critiques suggested that they were externally imposed reforms that were not consistent with local values, and that the stringent admissions criteria imposed by CAEP's Standard Three would make it even harder for programs to recruit diverse teacher candidates (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education [AACTE], 2015). Shifting forms of accountability and political wrangling continued to hinder advances in clinical educator preparation, and there was a recognition that policies and practices must be responsive to differing communities of practice (AACTE Clinical Practice Commission [CPC], 2018). Research highlighted that policies and structures that define educator preparation need to be rigorous, ethical, and professional while ensuring that teacher candidates are prepared to meet the needs of all learners (AACTE CPC, 2018). Some reformers, however, concluded that the failure of EPPs to use uniformed measures caused a lack of public confidence in teacher education and the inability to produce effective new teachers (Cochran-Smith et al., 2018a).

## The Inclusive Classroom

A goal of education reformists for many years was to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Rogers & Johnson, 2018). Inclusive education was an approach that mixed special education and general education students in classroom settings to promote diversity and create a more equitable society (Tahir et al., 2019). An inclusionary movement occurred in response to federal legislation such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 and No Child Left Behind of 2002 (Rogers & Johnson, 2018). This legislation led to an increase in the number of students with disabilities receiving instruction in the general education classroom, causing general education teachers to be responsible for meeting the needs of both general education students and students with severe/multiple disabilities (Rogers & Johnson, 2018). With IDEA 2004 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, public policy at the federal level aimed to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to all students, including those with disabilities (Tahir et al., 2019). Teachers in inclusive classrooms continued to instruct learners with a range of needs without detailed information or training about how to teach to all the students' diverse needs (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018). Tahir et al.'s (2019) study indicated that providing services to students with severe disabilities with their non-disabled peers in general education classrooms had emerged as a challenge for school districts and EPPs. As EPPs continued to grapple with the most effective ways to prepare teacher candidates for diverse schools, many teachers reported feeling they needed more special education preparation (Doran, 2020).

## The Traditional Field and Clinical Experience

Traditional EPPs included university-based undergraduate or postgraduate programs providing coursework and clinical training through student teaching (Podolsky, 2019). While there has been an increase in the number of alternative routes to teacher certification, as of 2018, 77% of educators still obtained their educator preparation through a traditional route (Partelow, 2019). Traditionally, a teacher candidate completed an early-level practicum experience consisting of observations, a mid-level field experience consisting of practicums, and a culminating experience of student teaching (DESE, 2020). At the entry-level, teacher candidates observed in the classroom setting (Koch, 2020). At the mid-level or practicum level, teacher candidates may have been considered a participant observer (Koch, 2020). At this level, to learn about teaching methods and child and adolescent development, teacher candidates spent part of the school day immersed in the school for a number of hours to participate and make careful observations while studying the classroom environment (Koch, 2020). In the culminating experience, also known as student teaching, teacher candidates were assigned to a cooperating teacher for a 10- to 12-week placement. They were expected to teach the class while being formally observed by a university supervisor (Koch, 2020). Cooperating teachers in a traditional setting provided space for student teachers to implement instruction while providing them with feedback (Stobaugh & Everson, 2019).

Several education schools had begun to replace student teaching with alternative models such as internships, fellowships, and the restructuring of clinical fieldwork because the traditional student teaching model was considered outdated and insufficient (Fraser & Watson, 2014). Many universities struggled with program innovations and how to immerse EPPs in clinical practices (Castro & Edwards, 2021; American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education Clinical Practice Commission [AACTE CPC], 2018). The AACTE CPC indicated several factors as to why the advancement of clinical educator preparation had been slow to emerge, including the idea that reform efforts in educator preparation vary, are cumbersome, and are too slowly enacted (AACTE CPC, 2018). These characteristics that inhibit reform were concerning when considering the United States' growing numbers of students in high-need school settings (Fraser & Watson, 2014) and an understanding that EPP policies and practices need to be responsive to diverse communities and contexts (AACTE CPC, 2018).

## Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how teachers from traditional EPPs perceived their field and clinical experiences prepared them for their first years of teaching. While exploring results from teachers who experienced traditional field and clinical experiences, the Researcher examined the following research questions: How do novice teachers utilize their Education Preparation Programs' clinical training in the classroom? What field experiences do novice teachers perceive as most beneficial for their classroom practices? How do novice teachers perceive their training to teach students with special needs? What challenges do novice teachers experience converting theory from Education Preparation Programs into daily classroom practice?

This study followed the exploratory qualitative research method by interpreting the perspectives of participants and their lived experiences. The interview protocol derived from the research

questions and aligned with the MoSPE standards was created to provide opportunities for participants to richly describe their field and clinical experiences through in-depth interviews. Applying the MoSPE standards when gathering new teachers' perceptions of their clinical experiences within an EPP provided evidence of successful and unsuccessful practices. In-depth interviewing allowed the Researcher to explore complex and potentially contradictory matters by exploring multiple perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

## **Research Participants**

The Researcher used Midwestern K-5 general education teachers that held a valid teacher certification from DESE. Participants were new teachers within the Weber Springs School District (WSSD). WSSD was a pseudonym provided to protect the identity of participants and the participating school district. The participants were teachers within their first three years of teaching who received their teaching degree from a Midwestern EPP that incorporated a traditional field and clinical experience model since traditional preparation programs account for the majority of EPPs nationally (USDE, 2015). This purposive sample was intended to gain multiple perspectives on how the new teachers believed that their educational field and clinical experiences adequately prepared them for their first years of teaching.

## **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed in several ways. By using the analytic memos after interviews were conducted, important markers for data were collected. Reflecting on those markers and pulling interview evidence to support the Researcher's assertions was an essential outcome of the data analysis.

Next, an inductive coding method was derived from the Researcher's data collected throughout the interviewing process. The Researcher utilized transcription software to create verbatim transcripts of each recorded in-depth interview. The Researcher used first-cycle coding by reading each interview transcript and identifying codes that emerged. Second-cycle coding was used to reduce the codes and make meaning from them. This process included the use of axial coding to identify the codes' relationships and distill the major themes from the research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hesse-Biber, 2017). The Researcher then sorted the coded transcripts to determine the prevailing themes that emerged from the data.

## **Findings**

The traditional field and clinical experience model included student teaching, observing, assisting in classrooms, practicums, tutoring, and similar activities (Meyer, 2016). Most participants completed a single semester of student teaching. However, one participant student taught for an entire two-semester school year, and one participant had experiences within a laboratory school (Table 1). While the COVID-19 pandemic impacted many teacher candidates' clinical experiences after March 2020 due to school closures, only one participant's clinical experience in this study was impacted. Therefore, the impacts of COVID-19 on clinical experiences did not become a major theme within this study.

Research Question One asked, How do novice teachers utilize their Educator Preparation Programs' clinical training in the classroom? This study found that participants were impacted by the expert tutelage and relationship of their cooperating teacher and its effects on their early career practices. A challenge some EPPs faced was finding committed cooperating teachers (Parks et al., 2020) who were willing to mentor (Doran, 2020). Cooperating teachers in a traditional setting provided space for teacher candidates to implement instruction while providing them feedback (Stobaugh & Everson, 2019).

Like Joynt's (2019) study, many participants found value in their relationship with their cooperating teacher because of the support the cooperating teacher provided them. However, Teacher 10 and Teacher 11 shared how a negative experience with unwilling cooperating teachers impacted the experience in an adverse way.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Profile of Participants*

Participant	Years of Experience	Grade	Field and Clinical Experience
Teacher 1	2	5th	Traditional
Teacher 2	1	4th	Traditional
Teacher 3	1	2nd	Traditional
Teacher 4	1	4th	Traditional
Teacher 5	2	2nd	Traditional
Teacher 6	2	5th	Traditional
Teacher 7	2	5th	Laboratory School
Teacher 8	3	5th	Extended Student Teaching
Teacher 9	1	1st	Traditional
Teacher 10	2	4th	Traditional
Teacher 11	2	5th	Traditional

Research Question Two asked, What field experiences do novice teachers perceive as most beneficial for their classroom practices? Regarding what participants in this study perceived as most beneficial for their classroom practices, several shared that a diverse setting supported their

classroom practices. Diverse placements included a range of classroom grade levels, students with special needs, and social and cultural diversity. While exploring a community of practice, specifically the setting where the learning occurred, it was evident that participants appreciated or desired diverse placements. Participants believed that a diverse placement provided a better understanding of each grade level and provided an understanding of how different schools and school districts function. Lastly, a diverse placement provided an understanding of how students differ ethnically, behaviorally, and economically.

In addition to a diverse placement, participants noted the benefits of an extended clinical opportunity. Extended opportunities can provide more exposure to learner diversity, and self-reflective practices (Ha, 2018), and enrich skill sets (Swindlehurst et al., 2020). This study showed participants had a desire for additional clinical experience throughout their EPPs. Participants shared the perceived and experienced benefits of an extended clinical experience. Teachers 3, 5, and 11 shared their desire for an extended clinical experience to allow additional opportunities within an authentic classroom environment. When sharing about an ideal clinical experience, Teachers 7 and 8 called upon their extended clinical experience and how it built confidence and exposed them to a range of teachers and teaching styles, school structures, and authentic instructional opportunities.

Research Question Three asked, How do novice teachers perceive their training to teach students with special needs? This study found that participants believed they had a lack of experience working with students with special needs within their clinical experience including a lack of activities aligned with working with students with special needs, including coursework and clinical experiences. Teachers 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11 stated that they only took one to two courses focused on working with students with special needs. Participants believed that such little generalized coursework did not prepare them for teaching in an inclusive classroom. The only participant who stated they felt prepared to teach students with special needs going into their first year of teaching in a general education classroom was Teacher 8, who had a year-long student teaching experience. Participants shared that they did not feel prepared to teach students with special needs during their first years of teaching in an inclusive classroom due to a lack of coursework and clinical opportunities focused on working with students with special needs.

Research Question Four asked, What challenges do novice teachers experience converting theory from Educator Preparation Programs into daily classroom practice? Research participants identified differentiated instructional challenges upon entering their own classroom. Differentiated instruction is an instructional strategy that improves the effectiveness of education by meeting students at their level, learning styles, and abilities (Weber et al., 2018). Considering students' levels, learning styles, and abilities when lesson planning helps meet special education students' needs and supports general education students as well. Participants shared their struggle with converting what they understood about differentiated instruction from their EPP into their daily practices to meet the needs of all learners in their classrooms.

Teacher 7 experienced an extended clinical experience within the laboratory EPP she attended. While she found value in entering the field as early as her freshman year, the laboratory school her EPP was affiliated with was not academically diverse, making it a shock as a first-year teacher when she had a range of student abilities and needs.

Out of all the attributes that lead to participants' low confidence in differentiated instruction, the predominant factor was a lack of exposure to both instructional strategies for differentiated instruction and authentic experiences to implement those strategies.

## Discussion

The themes that emerged from the data provided an understanding of teachers' perceptions of their field and clinical experience and its impact on their practices within an inclusive classroom. An awareness of teachers' perceptions of their clinical experiences extending to their ability to transfer acquired skills to inclusive classrooms is essential in determining best practices among EPPs.

### Classroom Management

The first two themes within this study, incorporating classroom management techniques and the effect of cooperating teachers, emerged from RQ1, how do novice teachers utilize their Educator Preparation Programs' clinical training in the classroom? Theme one delved into how participants utilized classroom management techniques they learned throughout the clinical training within their classrooms. Participants found value in practical strategies and activities they could directly connect to throughout their program and felt prepared until entering their own classrooms. This circumstance is similar to Livers et al.'s (2021) study that found teachers initially felt prepared to implement classroom management techniques until entering their first years of teaching.

### Cooperating Teachers

With SLT as this study's theoretical framework, the goal was to explore the process and development of learning from an expert within the participant's field. This study suggested that the relationship between cooperating teachers and teacher candidates can positively or negatively impact teachers' perceptions of their clinical experience. When cooperating teachers are invested in the mentorship and collaboration with teacher candidates, teacher candidates have an improved perception of their ability to transfer learned skills into their classroom, such as building relationships, classroom management techniques, and lesson planning. It is important to note that positive discourse between the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate was also critical to participants. While many participants believed they learned essential teaching practices from their cooperating teachers, the data shows that negative interactions between the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate can have a negative impact on the teacher candidates' perceptions of their overall clinical experience. Because EPPs are faced with the challenge of finding committed cooperating teachers willing to mentor, it can lead to cooperating teachers carrying the burden of mentoring teacher candidates when it is not their desire.

### Diverse Setting for Field and Clinical Experience

With SLT as this study's theoretical framework, the Researcher aimed to explore a community of practice that pertains to the setting where the learning occurred. Participants in the study shared that a diverse setting within their clinical experience supported their classroom practices. The data

suggested that participants believed that a diverse placement provided a better understanding of each grade level and an understanding of how different schools and school districts function. Participants also believed that a diverse placement provided an understanding of how students differ ethnically, behaviorally, and economically. Teacher candidates who experienced diverse placements appreciated opportunities to explore a range of grade levels and school sites. Participants believed it helped them decide where they could see themselves as most successful in their future classroom. Participants also appreciated the opportunity to work with students with varied backgrounds, ethnicities, and abilities and observe cooperating teachers working with diverse students to better understand instructional strategies they may be able to incorporate in their classrooms. The data also showed a desire for diverse clinical experiences among participants who did not receive such an opportunity. Teachers 2 and 5 shared that the void of diverse placements left them ill-prepared to work with students below or above grade level or with students who had faced trauma.

### **Extended Field and Clinical Experience**

The data suggested that participants who had an extended clinical experience appreciated their additional time in classrooms and believed it positively impacted their practices. Furthermore, the participants who experienced a single semester of student teaching desired an additional clinical experience to allow increased opportunities within an authentic classroom environment. Data showed that participants who did not experience extended clinical experiences believed that entering elementary classrooms sooner and more often would have provided them with additional opportunities to observe teachers, build relationships with students, and improve their teaching practices.

### **Authentic Experiences Working with Special Needs Students**

With SLT as the theoretical framework, this study aimed to consider how situations and activities within the clinical experience impacted the participant's ability to transfer their learned skills into their first years of teaching. Participants in this study shared a lack of activities aligned with working with students with special needs, including coursework and clinical experiences. Participants shared that they did not gain the instructional practice they needed to enter an inclusive classroom. Some data suggested that additional special education coursework could improve teachers' perceptions of their ability to teach students with special needs. Also, the data suggests that an opportunity to align special education coursework to authentic experiences could positively impact teachers' ability to transfer their learned skills into their first years of teaching.

### **Underprepared to Teach Students with Special Needs**

Participants in this study shared that they did not feel prepared to teach students with special needs during their first years of teaching in an inclusive classroom due to the lack of authentic opportunities and interactions with students with special needs. The data from this study supports Puliatte et al.'s (2019) claim that increased interactions could improve teacher candidates' attitudes toward inclusion and their ability to work with students with disabilities. Data shows that this study's participants did not understand how to accommodate students with disabilities in the general education classroom due to their lack of experience working with students with special

needs. Participants believed they did not gain an understanding of the IEP process or how to maintain compliance with student IEPs through accommodations and modifications of grade-level content standards.

### **Differentiated Instruction Challenges**

Participants believed they were not prepared to differentiate instruction due to a lack of exposure to differentiated instructional strategies and authentic opportunities to implement those strategies. The data suggested that inadequate opportunities to implement differentiated instructional practices within clinical experiences can lead to low self-efficacy among teacher candidates when working with a range of academic abilities upon entering their own classrooms. Outside of students with IEPs, general education classrooms have a range of abilities, from students with differing academic abilities, learning styles, and readiness. Hills et al.'s (2021) study also found that the broad spectrum of special and general education needs may leave some new teachers unequipped as general education teachers are called upon to teach special education. Results indicated that a lack of exposure to differentiated instructional strategies and the opportunity to practice those strategies in an authentic setting led to low self-confidence among participants when working with students with diverse needs in the general education classroom.

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this qualitative research benefit EPPs who offer traditional certification routes through their programs. EPPs are accountable for their product and the quality of the certification candidates who complete their program. The Researcher explored field and clinical experiences and their impact on teachers' perceptions of their readiness to enter the profession and teach diverse learners. Because there is a broad range of what is considered a diverse learner, this research may not represent teachers' perceptions of preparedness to meet the needs of all diverse learners. The findings indicate that teacher candidates need extended clinical experiences within varied and diverse settings that provide ample opportunities to work with diverse students under the guidance of knowledgeable and willing cooperating teachers.

### **Extended Clinical Experiences**

Participants shared that they were not provided with the amount of clinical experience necessary for ample opportunities to observe and transition into taking over classroom responsibilities from their cooperating teachers. It is important to note that this study was limited to participants who were general education teachers who taught kindergarten through fifth grade, so the data is only representative of elementary educators' perceptions, which may differ from secondary educators whose clinical experiences and requirements may differ. Participants shared their desire to get into classrooms earlier and more often to provide them with a better understanding of classroom expectations, how to build relationships with students, and teaching styles. Participants who attended an EPP with extended clinical experiences shared that the additional time in classrooms provided them with the ability to familiarize themselves with standards, gain an understanding of how to assess students and have an extensive opportunity to observe classroom management and lesson planning techniques. Implementing an extended clinical experience within EPPs would provide teacher candidates with opportunities for additional observations and applications of

teaching styles, classroom management techniques, and working with diverse students. Thus, extended clinical experiences would improve teacher candidates' confidence in the classroom and prepare them for the responsibilities they will have in their future classroom.

### **Varied and Diverse Clinical Settings**

In addition to extended clinical experiences, implementing varied and diverse settings in which the clinical experience occurs would improve teacher candidates' preparedness to teach in a diverse classroom. Regarding what participants in this study perceived as most beneficial for their classroom practices, several shared that a diverse setting supported their classroom practices. Diverse settings included a range of schools, classroom grade levels, students with special needs, and social and cultural diversity. Varied and diverse clinical experiences can help teacher candidates understand what to expect upon entering the classroom and concerning students' differences and needs.

### **Collaborative Cooperating Teachers**

Lastly, it is essential that EPPs place teacher candidates under the guidance of knowledgeable and willing cooperating teachers. Participants in this study found value in their relationship with their cooperating teacher because of the support the cooperating teacher provides them, from lesson planning strategies, classroom management techniques, and building relationships with students. According to Joynt (2019), when teacher candidates are provided with collaborative opportunities and support from their cooperating teacher, it can lead to self-perceived readiness to enter the field. It is important for EPPs to vet cooperating teachers to ensure that they are willing and knowledgeable participants within the teacher candidates' community of practice.

## **Conclusions**

This qualitative study revealed information that can be useful for EPPs seeking to improve their teacher candidate field and clinical experiences. This study found that participants found value in practical strategies and activities they could directly connect to throughout their programs, such as classroom management techniques and lesson planning. However, when entering their own classroom, Participants had difficulties transferring their learned skills from their clinical experience due to the range of student abilities and behaviors they were faced with. Participants were concerned that, from their field and clinical experiences, they did not gain the knowledge and skills they needed to adequately meet the needs of diverse learners within their inclusive classrooms.

This study suggested that the relationship between cooperating teachers and teacher candidates can positively impact teachers' perceptions of their clinical experience. When cooperating teachers were invested in the mentorship and collaboration with teacher candidates, teacher candidates had an improved perception of their ability to transfer learned skills into their classroom, such as building relationships, classroom management techniques, and lesson planning. Positive discourse added value to the relationships between cooperating teachers and teacher candidates. Thus, participants felt supported and empowered to transfer their learned skills into their future classrooms.

Insights from this study suggested that extended, diverse placements with authentic opportunities to work with diverse students could improve teacher candidates' self-efficacy in working with diverse learners in an inclusive classroom. Participants who had an extended clinical experience appreciated their additional time in classrooms and believed it positively impacted their practices. Participants who experienced diverse placements believed that they provided an understanding of how students differ ethnically, behaviorally, and economically. Participants also believed diverse placements helped them decide where they could see themselves as most successful in their future classroom. When considering which aspects of the field and clinical experiences participants found most beneficial, the data suggested that an extended opportunity to align special education coursework to authentic experiences could positively impact teachers' ability to transfer their learned skills into their first years of teaching.

In conclusion, the study revealed that participants' field and clinical experience did not prepare them to teach in an inclusive classroom. The findings indicated that teacher candidates need extended clinical experiences within varied and diverse settings that provide ample opportunities to work with diverse students under the guidance of knowledgeable and willing cooperating teachers. EPPs will have to consider ways to provide teacher candidates with such field and clinical experiences to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to be effective general education teachers within inclusive classrooms.

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