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Understanding Student Experiences Within Diverse Models of Clinical Experience

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Connecting Theory to Practice

**Understanding Student
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69670/mje.2.1.3><https://www.williamwoods.edu/academics/mje>**Dr. Jeri Goswick****Dr. Jamie Foister****Dr. Tonya Heavin****Abstract**

This study investigates experiential learning's role and efficacy within an educational preparation program (EPP) during their clinical experience. The study aims to understand the perceptions of teacher candidates who completed a traditional clinical experience compared to an alternative clinical experience as part of their bachelor's degree in education. The results indicate that learning through experience and reflection upon those experiences provide an opportunity for improved support from EPPs and sponsoring districts. Data collected included feedback from teacher candidates on how the EPPs and sponsoring school districts could provide additional support. The responses were categorized into two groups: students completing their clinical experience in a traditional student-teaching placement and those completing their clinical experience through an alternative program as a Teacher of Record. The data was analyzed for common themes as well as themes unique to either category. The researchers found that both groups identified Professional Learning and Growth and Relationships and Support as strengths of the programs, while teacher candidates serving as Teacher of Record experienced more Financial Stability. Challenges shared between the groups were Balancing Responsibilities, Communication, and Classroom Management. Traditional teacher candidates experienced more Financial Insecurity and struggled with Lesson Planning and Adapting to Standards and Curriculum. The authors share ideas for how EPPs and sponsoring districts might improve clinical practices and opportunities for further research.

Keywords

Educator Preparation, Clinical Experience, Teacher Efficacy

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Introduction

In the past decade, much research has focused on teacher preparation and persistence related to alternative certification routes (Guthery & Bailes, 2022; Fenwick, 2022). Although the increased opportunities for alternative routes to teacher certification have reduced barriers to entering the profession, alternatively certified teachers are less likely to remain in long-term education (Guthery & Bailes, 2022). Therefore, if alternative certification is not the answer, how might traditional routes to certification be modified to be more accessible to students with limited resources and marginalized communities? In order to move in this direction, more research is needed to understand the benefits and challenges of traditional and alternative clinical experiences. Darling-Hammond (2009) wrote, “studies on the efficacy of various routes into teaching should examine teachers’ experience and carefully consider the nature of the comparison group” (p. 2).

In the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Educator Vacancy Report (2022), Missouri received feedback from 77.4% of the school districts within the state. The data showed three certification areas where the full time equivalent vacancies were the highest: Elementary Education, with 2,184 vacancies, 97% filled with less-than-fully certified teachers; Special Education, with 983 vacancies, 65% filled with less-than-fully certified teachers; and Physical Education, with 291 vacancies, 25% filled with less-than-fully certified teachers (DESE, 2022). Two years later, the number of vacancies increased, with 556 district and charter schools reporting 12,333 vacancies. Of those vacancies, 9,692 (77.3%) were filled with appropriately certified educators; however, of the remaining 2,823 vacancies, 1,932 (15.4%) were filled with inappropriately certified educators, and 891 (7.1%) were left vacant (DESE, 2024). The most significant number of vacancies continues to be in the areas of Elementary Education, Special Education, and Physical Education. The pronounced need for more appropriately certified educators in Missouri is evident.

Missouri is not alone in the quest to fill teacher vacancies. Schools throughout the nation are understaffed, and vacancies within the classrooms are widespread. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), 44% of all public schools had one or more vacant teaching positions. The percentages of vacancies increase when looking at schools with specific characteristics, such as high-poverty neighborhoods, at 55%, and high-minority student bodies, at 58% (NCES, 2022a). The need for quality educators is a national crisis.

As a result of the extreme teacher shortage crisis, school districts, Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs), and state governing organizations overseeing educator certification have been forced to implement alternative paths to educator certification. In Missouri, these alternative routes include:

1. Provisional certification for those with a bachelor’s degree who wish to return to college to pursue a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT). The MAT enables the student to take courses and teach simultaneously. Students are given provisional certification and two years to complete their degree, typically requiring about 30 hours of graduate courses and passing of the designated exam.
2. Temporary Authorization Certificate (TAC) for those with a bachelor’s degree in a content area who complete a minimum of 24 to 39 college credits to meet specified competencies, are employed and mentored by a school district, and pass the necessary exams. The individual works under a one-year renewable certificate that requires nine semester hours of college credit each year to be

renewed.

3. Out-of-State Certification for those with a valid certificate from another state.
4. American Board of Certification for Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) allows for those with a bachelor's degree to complete a program of study from ABCTE, pass its specific test, and be certified. This program does not involve an accredited EPP.
5. Doctoral route. Individuals who hold a Ph.D. in a secondary certification content area may be issued an initial certificate by passing a professional knowledge assessment (DESE, n.d.).

In June 2022, the Superintendent's recommendation for initial certification was signed into law (DESE, n.d.). This allows those who have completed a traditional route towards certification but cannot pass the final designated assessment test to pursue an alternative route towards certification.

Although the above routes have relieved the shortage, many universities and school districts use creative alternatives to fill their classroom vacancies. The Provisional Teacher of Record (TOR) certification allows those students within 12 hours of completing a traditional teacher preparation program to be provisionally certified if employed in a Missouri public school or an accredited private school. While not ideal, the long-term substitute does not provide a route to certification and has increasingly been used by districts to fill vacancies.

The purpose of this study, grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, was to understand and reflect upon the benefits and challenges of the clinical experiences for both traditional student teachers and student teachers serving as a TOR in an attempt to provide concrete practices that may help future clinical experience models. The following alternative programs were analyzed:

- students serving on a provisional certificate while completing a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT)
- students employed by a district on a Temporary Authorization Certificate (TAC)
- students serving as a TOR for their final student-teaching semester,
- students serving as long-term substitutes

This study allowed the researchers to understand the clinical experience. This knowledge will help EPPs, public schools, and other stakeholders educate future teachers who accept an alternative clinical experience, work as a classroom teacher while finishing their degree, and improve teacher retention.

Literature Review

Kolb's model of Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) is beneficial for both teaching and research, allowing researchers to follow the same stages and sequence in a study to gain more understanding and reach concrete conclusions (Asiri, 2020). According to Kolb & Kolb (2005), "Learning is best conceived as a process, not in terms of outcomes. To improve learning in higher education, the primary focus should be on engaging students in a process that best enhances their learning" (p. 194). Long-term internships, such as clinical experiences through EPPs, allow students to be fully engaged in the experience while meeting graduation and state requirements for the profession, fitting nicely into the experiential learning model. According to Asiri (2020), "ELT proposes that any experience may be transformed into a reliable source of knowledge" (para. 7), and in order to make it more meaningful, researchers should provide authentic experiences, and guide participants and stakeholders to reflect, think, and act upon the relevant information that may impact the research.

The teacher shortage crisis continues to grow. The National Center for Education Statistics noted that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problem, with 63% of schools with vacancies citing the pandemic as a cause (NCES, 2022b). Though the shortage is widespread, schools with greater numbers of low-income and minority students are particularly affected and have historically been staffed with less qualified teachers (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2012).

Regarding teacher preparation program trends, Fenwick (2022) reported that there are “slightly more providers, offering fewer programs to fewer students and producing fewer program completers” (p. 13). Even with the addition of alternative programs, Schmitt and deCourcy (2022) claimed nontraditional teacher preparation programs have not made up the difference. In a follow-up report regarding the teacher labor market, García & Weiss (2019a) claimed that teacher attrition, coupled with the reduced teacher pipeline, increased pressure on schools to hire teachers with fewer credentials, thus negatively impacted the overall qualification of the workforce. They further claimed that teachers who enter teaching from alternative programs feel less prepared to do their jobs in the classroom (2019).

Missouri reported that 4.16% of teaching positions were vacant or inappropriately certified in 2024 (DESE, 2024). These shortages led many districts to hire teacher candidates prior to their completion of student teaching experience. However, teacher qualification remains an important indicator of student achievement, noted Adamson and Darling-Hammond (2012). Schools must balance increasing the number of teachers and not lowering the standards for those incoming teachers.

Defining Types of Clinical Practice

In the ever-changing clinical experience and the absence of a universally accepted vocabulary distinguishing between clinical practice models, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) began developing a clinical practice lexicon (Ellis et al., 2024). This paper identifies six models of clinical practice currently used to prepare new teachers (p.10):

1. Traditional Model
2. Professional Development Schools
3. Teacher Residency Programs
4. Registered Teacher Apprentice Programs,
5. Abbreviated Clinical Practice with First-Year Support
6. Fast-Track without Experience Teaching Full-Time

Although this study’s clinical experience model for alternative clinical experiences does not fully fit into any of the models listed above, it does have components of the Traditional Model, the Professional Development Schools (PDS) model, and the Registered Teacher Apprentice model. Students participating in the alternative clinical experiences are typically paid as full-time teachers, complete coursework aligned to the clinical experience and include strong partnerships and support with local P-12 partners (pp. 10-18).

Traditional Models of Student Teaching

Student teaching has traditionally been identified as an opportunity for preservice teachers to apply what they have learned through the higher education classroom in an authentic school setting, working with children (Liu, 2022). Traditional student teachers have experienced semesters of gaining knowledge, learning theories, and practicing their craft before being placed into a classroom with a mentor teacher. It

is often the role of the mentor teacher that impacts the student teacher the most. Lui (2022) explained the role of the mentor as one who models responsibility inside and outside the classroom. Student teachers who engage in reciprocal collaboration “evolve from being one-sided” (Liu, 2022, p. 69). This collaboration encourages the student teacher to use their strengths and skills while learning from their failures. Lutovac and Flores (2021) noted that the optimistic view of failure as a means to growth may help student teachers become more reflective of their craft.

One of the more challenging aspects of traditional student teaching involves classroom management. Having a mentor teacher to help guide the pre-service teacher through the challenges may provide student teachers with examples of strategies in problem-solving skills and allow for real-world practice (Liu, 2022). The traditional model of student teaching allows preservice teachers to learn alongside experts in their educational field while developing their confidence and discovering their teacher identity (Liu, 2022; Lutovac & Flores, 2021).

Best Practices for Student Teachers as Full-Time Teachers

Alternative licensure programs have developed, but these programs often offer inadequate preparation and contribute to the revolving door of teacher attrition (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). A recent study involving career and technical educators found that students who were serving as full-time teachers needed coaching support during transition time, targeted support in classroom management, and scheduled meetings and observations with the triad (student teacher, cooperating teacher, and university supervisor) for their success (Shultz et al., 2023). The study also recommends that the administration select experienced mentors for support, provide high-quality curriculum, and reduce the load of non-instructional activities to support teacher candidates as full-time teachers (Shultz et al., 2023).

Other programs, such as residency models that provide extended clinical practice with compensation, provide promising results. One study found that students in paid residency models equally or outperformed traditional student teacher performance in 15 out of 17 components. With this newly designed model, not only did resident teachers receive compensation, but they were also provided one day a week of intensive job-embedded training. This type of model places “district collaboration at the forefront of both design and implementation of teacher training” (Greathouse & Dobbins, 2023, p. 4), an essential component of supporting student teachers as full-time teachers before completing their teacher education program.

Impacts of Alternative or Traditional Certification on Attrition

Guthery and Bailes (2022) focused on teacher attrition through teacher preparation and the initial type of school employment in Texas. This large-scale study provided several key discoveries that may impact EPPs nationwide. Notably, the research found an equal number of teachers employed with traditional certification (43%) and with alternative certification (43%); 14% received certification from other means, such as out-of-state certifications (Guthery & Bailes, 2022, p. 234). However, the study found that retention rates varied based on a 5-year benchmark. For those placed in a traditional public school from a traditionally prepared program, retention rates were 43%; whereas, for teachers from alternatively certified programs placed in a traditional public school, retention rates were 38% (p. 239). Findings also concluded that while many individuals are interested in education, the preparation program and initial employment site significantly impact their willingness to continue teaching (p. 243).

The concept of an alternative certification process is to quickly prepare high-caliber teachers who may not have the resources, such as time and money, to complete a traditional teacher preparation program (Guthery

& Bailes, 2022, p. 232). The increase in alternative certification programs may be beneficial for utilizing limited resources and providing an innovative technique for satisfying the need to place qualified educators in a classroom. The caution remains that not all programs are created equal, and the approaches to alternative certification are often varied (p. 229). If the program's quality is in question, the impact on students can be detrimental. "The experience of having an inexperienced or ineffective teacher year after year can have a negative cumulative effect" (Guthery & Bailes, 2022, p. 226).

Summary

Overall, schools face extreme challenges filling their vacancies due to more teachers leaving and fewer teachers entering the profession. This leakage of teachers contributes to districts hiring less qualified teachers, which impacts the teacher workforce overall (García & Weiss, 2019a). Although alternative certification programs provide paths to certification outside of a traditional preparation program, research indicates that alternative certification programs have a lower retention rate (Guthery & Bailes, 2022). Specific strategies such as instructional coaching, mentorship, and targeted support may be needed to support and improve quality and retention of alternatively certified teachers (Shultz et al., 2023).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to gain insights and understand how students make sense of their educational experience (Efron & Ravid, 2020). The goal was to understand the experiences identified by teacher candidates during their clinical experience in both traditional and alternative programs to identify perhaps areas of improvement needed to support future student teachers during their clinical experience semester. The sampling method employed in this study is convenience sampling (Efron & Ravid, 2020). In convenience sampling, participants are chosen because they are accessible to the researcher (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Convenience sampling is considered a standard approach when conducting qualitative research, particularly in education (Efron & Ravid, 2020). While convenience sampling has its advantages, it may impact the validity or trustworthiness of the study to the degree to which the study "accurately represents the issue being investigated" (2020, p. 75). In order to improve the study's trustworthiness, the researchers surveyed student teachers from four consecutive semesters.

Population Sample

This case study's total population exceeded 100 student teachers within the following categories over a four-semester timeline:

- students serving on a provisional certificate while completing a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT)
- students employed by a district on a Temporary Authorization Certificate (TAC)
- students serving as a TOR for their final student-teaching semester,
- students serving as a long-term substitute,
- students placed in a traditional student-teaching semester with support in the classroom.

The results are based on the responses of 35 student teachers in a clinical experience in various southwest Missouri public schools. Of the 35 teacher candidates, one student was working as a paraprofessional, 12 were employed as a TOR on a provisional license, and 23 were completing their clinical experience in a

traditional classroom with the support of a cooperating teacher. This sample was selected to ascertain diverse viewpoints from individuals participating as teacher candidates. It is noted that this purposeful sampling was chosen due to the nature of the research, and the low response rate impacts the generalizability of the study. All students surveyed had completed their clinical experience between the academic years of 2022 and 2024.

Procedure

The researchers used enrollment data of students completing their clinical experience during the academic years of 2022-2023 and 2023-2024 to survey students just after completing their clinical experience. Participants were emailed a link to an online survey and invited to complete six open-ended questions (see Appendix A). These queries allowed respondents to provide feedback about their student-teaching experience. Students were asked to identify their current category of clinical experience or certification status. For example, a student serving as a TOR could also indicate they were under a provisional certification. Students would indicate Teacher Candidate as their status for those in a traditional placement. The remaining questions relate to the program's rewards and challenges and allow students to identify the support or lack of support from the EPP and the sponsoring districts (see Appendix A).

A multistep process was utilized to determine the unbiased themes of the respondents' replies. First the responses for each question were grouped. The researchers used the first-cycle coding technique of categorical coding (Maxwell, 2013) to group the open-ended statements provided by the respondents. This was followed by focused coding to identify the most frequent responses, which became the recurring themes. An artificial intelligence (AI) summarization tool was then used in the thematic analysis. Thematic analysis using AI has become reliable in assisting researchers in understanding potential themes without bias (Christou, 2024). However, a researcher's oversight is essential to improve codes and refine analysis. Therefore, the next step required each researcher to review the data individually to confirm, deny, or revise the preliminary findings. The researchers met in the final review process to discuss and finalize the common themes.

Respondent replies were placed into two categories: students completing their clinical experience traditionally and those completing their clinical experience through an alternative program as a TOR. Traditionally, teacher candidates completing their clinical experience were supported by in-person courses on campus while completing a 16-week clinical experience with a Cooperating Teacher in the classroom. Teacher candidates completing their clinical experience through an alternative program completed the certification process as a TOR, absent a Cooperating Teacher in the classroom, and with support through online course delivery. All participants completed a minimum of three formal observations throughout their clinical experience as part of state requirements using the Missouri Educator Evaluation System. These in-person observations included the university supervisor and cooperating teacher.

Results

The purpose of this study, grounded in Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, was to understand and reflect upon the benefits and challenges of the clinical experiences for both traditional student teachers and student teachers serving as a TOR in an attempt to provide concrete practices that may help future clinical experience models. Darling-Hammond and Sykes (2003) noted that developing high-quality preparation models helps lessen the impact of the teacher shortage and quality inequities.

The findings provide important implications for EPPs, sponsoring school districts, and teacher candidates.

As we report the findings, students who completed their clinical experience in a classroom with a cooperating teacher will be referred to as traditional teacher candidates. Teacher candidates completing their clinical experience as a TOR without a cooperating teacher are referred to as alternative program teacher candidates. Finally, the results may sometimes combine any paid position as Employed, including those serving as a TOR, long-term substitute, or paraeducator.

Rewards Within the Programs

The teacher candidates were asked about their greatest reward during their preparatory program. Overall, 20 (57%) of students from both categories identified *Professional Learning and Growth* as one of the program's benefits. One traditional student teacher commented,

The greatest rewards have been seeing myself grow. I know there were many things about teaching I was hesitant about when I joined Teacher Ed, but I have gained confidence in front of a classroom since I began the program.

An alternative program teacher candidate wrote, "The professors truly care and I know that they have my back. I'm succeeding teaching this year partly due to what I learned in each of their classes."

Relationships and support was another common theme for both categories of students. Of the 35 respondents, thirteen (37%) wrote about building relationships with their students, their cooperating teachers and districts, and the university faculty. These relationships were seen as one of the keys to success within their clinical experiences and as beginning teachers. One traditional student commented that working closely with a veteran teacher helped them learn valuable skills and be more successful. In contrast, another student responded that they appreciated the opportunity to learn from their mistakes while still under the supervision of a cooperating teacher.

Rewards for Student Teachers in a Specific Category

When reviewing the responses of the Employed category, in addition to the most significant rewards listed above, four employed students also identified the opportunity to have *Financial Stability* as an additional reward. The clinical experience can be equated to a full-time job, and the teacher candidates are asked not to work during their experience. Those hired by the supporting school districts received a paycheck for their work within the program. One paraprofessional responded that the ability to be employed allowed her to relocate to be with her husband during the clinical experience. At the same time, a TOR wrote, "I also was fortunate to be a teacher of record and being able to fulfill graduation requirements for my degree and also earn a salary has allowed financial stability for myself and my family."

Challenges Within the Programs

When teacher candidates were asked to identify their most significant challenge(s) during their clinical experience, the following themes were identified: *balancing responsibilities, communication, and classroom management*. Students often replied with multiple challenges in this category. Therefore, the results below may include the total percent of students identifying the category as at least one of their challenges.

Forty-three percent of participants identified the difficulty of balancing their responsibilities. One TOR noted that "time management" was his most significant issue, but he was "learning and growing." Another

TOR commented, “Balancing life, school, work, and family was a learning experience.” Although challenging for those completing their experience as a TOR, student comments seemed to reflect upon the growth of the experience. For student teachers, balancing responsibilities related to work outside of their clinical experience, completing coursework, and meeting professor and classroom expectations was challenging with the support of a cooperating teacher. One student teacher in a traditional placement commented that “maintaining a good balance between making sure I am getting my assignments and responsibilities taken care of while in placement” was a challenge.

Twenty percent of participants identified *communication* as an issue. Those serving as a TOR identified the complexity of learning a new system in a workplace. One TOR noted that their greatest challenge was “just knowing who to contact and where to go for information. There are a lot of moving parts.” The student struggled with knowing the chain of command or who to include in emails with student concerns and feared “leaving someone out of the loop accidentally.” This is part of the learning process of a first-year teacher. Without a cooperating teacher, it can be challenging to know these details. Similarly, students completing their experience with the support of a cooperating teacher noted that communication with their professors, university supervisors, and even the cooperating teacher was challenging at times. One student reported, “Probably the communication between my triad team” was the most challenging. The student related that struggles during her clinical experience might have been avoided had the communication been stronger between her, the university supervisor, and the cooperating teacher. Another student teacher in a traditional placement communicated a similar comment, stating, “Being in someone else’s classroom has been very challenging. As well as constant communication with my CT, because, again, it is not my classroom.” While TORs struggled to know who to communicate needed information to, student teachers with cooperating teachers often struggled with communicating with their cooperating teacher and/or university supervisor regarding issues.

Twenty-three percent of participants noted *classroom management* as a challenge. One TOR commented that their most significant challenge was “addressing extensive behavior in students and how best to meet their needs.” Another student in a traditional placement acknowledged that she sometimes allowed student behaviors to impact her negatively and had to “learn to separate student behaviors from their perceptions of me.”

Challenges for Student Teachers in a Specific Category

Six participants completing a traditional (non-paid) student teaching experience noted *financial insecurity as one of their greatest challenges*. Responses included “working a 40+ hour week and not getting paid,” “not having any sort of income to pay bills,” and “having only one income that is not mine.”

Additionally, five student teachers completing a traditional placement struggle more with *lesson planning* and *adapting to standards and curriculum*. One student commented that their most significant challenge was figuring out how to, “apply lesson planning to curriculum standards, especially in Special Education.” However, two TOR responses reflected more of a problem-solving focus. They understood the lesson plan and curriculum components, yet struggled with *meeting the needs of diverse learners*, specifically, “navigating different learning challenges among the students” and “coming up with solutions that seemed impossible.”

EPPs and School District Support of Student Teachers

Support from EPP

Overall, 97% of all participants noted *faculty accessibility and responsiveness* was key to their success. One student commented, "When I ran into issues working with my cooperating teacher, university faculty were able to help me work through these and reach out to my principal in hopes of finding solutions." Others noted frequent check-ins, unannounced visits, and providing specific feedback as supportive measures that faculty took to support student teachers. The following response provides insight into the responsiveness of an EPP faculty member.

The professors provided immense support for me. I felt heard regarding any concerns that I had. The feedback that I received on my coursework was helpful because I was able to make adjustments where needed. During my professional semester I had a wonderful evaluator that came in to observe me and he always had good, thoughtful things to say to me. He made me feel more at ease about teaching and was always so positive when giving me feedback even when it was feedback that required adjusting/changing.

One alternative program teacher candidate wrote, "I have struggled a bit with time management and conflict of schedules, but they have been supportive and kind as I have learned the processes." The teacher candidates pointed out that the EPP provided strong support for addressing students' academic and behavioral needs and that the faculty was readily available through email, phone calls, or Zoom. Specifically, faculty advisors, professors, and university supervisors were mentioned in the data.

Twelve traditional teacher candidates responded that they were exposed to a variety of *instructional strategies* in their courses, which supported their success in their clinical experience. One candidate responded that the EPP:

Provided me with support by giving me a broad variety of instructional strategies and detailed lesson plans. Although I will not write a detailed lesson plan for every lesson, it has helped me think through lessons and what I need to do for each student.

Six alternative program teacher candidates mentioned *structured support* through TOR lunches, frequent check-ins, and flexible deadlines. One candidate mentioned that this support helped them balance being a student and a teacher. Another TOR wrote:

Feeling a sense of community with others in my shoes was much more helpful mentally and emotionally than I would have expected. This was very helpful to share struggles and victories with other beginning teachers. I was also provided support through reference letters and professors acting as references helping me to get a job. Additionally, each week as a TOR I had a check-in with my university supervisor through phone call, email, or Google doc notes/conversation.

Support from Sponsoring School Districts

The teacher candidates were also asked how their sponsoring school districts supported them during their clinical experiences. Overall, 97% of responses identified *a supportive environment* as their greatest support from sponsoring districts. A TOR wrote, "I have gotten so much support. There has been an instructional coach hired for me and another TOR, (...). She has been nothing short of supportive and

positive.” In general, candidates mentioned receiving support from their Cooperating Teacher, teaching teams, administration, and other colleagues. Within the support category, 85% of participants also identified *collaboration and mentorship* as a significant component of that support. The candidates wrote about being involved in Response to Intervention groups, professional development opportunities and more. One TOR wrote:

My district supported me by encouraging me to observe both new and veteran teachers. My teaching team this year was highly collaborative and I have learned so much from the other two teachers in my team who hold 15+ years of kindergarten experience. They have shared advice, resources, and tools. I was also assigned an educator preparation specialist (who was also my cooperating teacher for student teaching) who was hired with the intent to support me in my classroom once a week.

Summary

Common themes found within the data for traditional and alternative format program candidates were *professional learning and growth* and *relationships and support*. The teacher candidates wrote about support from their advisors, teacher education faculty, and university supervisors. They also felt that they had grown considerably through the program. A unique advantage identified by the Employed category was *financial stability*. These teacher candidates appreciated the chance to complete their clinical experience while employed in their school districts.

Students completing their clinical experience in a traditional and alternative format experienced many of the same challenges, particularly *balancing responsibilities, communication, and classroom management*; however, those in a traditional (non-paid) clinical experience also suffered *financial insecurity*. Additionally, while student teachers in traditional placements struggled more with *lesson planning and adapting to standards and curriculum*, those in TOR placements seemed to have more confidence in that area and focused more on the challenge of *meeting the needs of diverse learners* and coming up with solutions for what seemed like impossible situations.

Support for student teachers in traditional and alternative placements identified *faculty accessibility and responsiveness* as an area of support. Responses were overwhelmingly positive regarding faculty and district personnel support. Checking in, providing feedback, and sharing of instructional strategies impacted student experience in a positive manner. Traditional students identified the strength of course learning in *instructional strategies* as a key area of support, while those completing the alternative clinical experience identified *structured support* provided for TORs as a key component of support.

Discussion and Implications

This study sought to understand and reflect upon the benefits and challenges of clinical experiences for both traditional student teachers and student teachers serving as TORs. It attempted to provide concrete practices that may help future clinical experience models. The findings provide insight into the benefits and challenges of traditional and alternative clinical experiences.

Financial Stability

While many students benefit from a semester-long placement with support in the classroom, financial stability is becoming increasingly challenging. Especially in the current economic climate, many teacher candidates cannot afford not to earn an income for such an extended time. Programs may want to consider

alternative pathways that allow teacher candidates to earn income while completing their clinical experience.

Support Relationships

The findings from this study and research (Greathouse & Dobbins, 2023) indicate the importance of a supportive and responsive relationship with the EPP faculty and district personnel. Liu (2022) emphasized the importance of mentor teachers in traditional settings for modeling responsibility and facilitating reciprocal collaboration, an advantage TORs may lack. Shultz et al. (2023) recommended coaching support, targeted classroom management assistance, and scheduled meetings for TOR success. Additionally, Guthery and Bailes (2022) found that alternatively certified teachers are less likely to remain in education long-term, and that teachers from traditional preparation programs placed in supportive environments have the highest probability of classroom retention. Therefore, teacher candidates may benefit from EPPs with strong district partnerships. This is further supported by research, which indicates that teachers from traditional preparation programs placed in an initial supportive environment have the highest probability of remaining in the classroom within the district (Guthery & Bailes, 2022). Studies regarding long-term clinical experiences continue to be important.

Implications

The implications for practice are significant. EPPs should consider developing hybrid models incorporating financial compensation while maintaining strong mentorship components. Targeted communication systems and classroom management support would benefit both pathways. High faculty responsiveness and structured support communities appear essential, particularly for alternative candidates. Residency models with compensation show promise, with one study finding students in paid residency models perform equal to or better than traditional student teachers in most components.

The findings from this study highlight the importance of supportive and responsive relationships with EPP faculty and district personnel. Teacher candidates may benefit from EPPs with strong district partnerships, as teachers from traditional preparation programs placed in supportive environments have the highest probability of remaining in the classroom. More investigation into quality preparation models that allow student teachers to earn income while finishing their certification will likely guide the design of future student-teaching models, potentially reimagining state-required clinical experiences in ways that positively impact teacher recruitment and retention.

Authentic experiences allow participants, EPPs, and stakeholders to reflect, think, and act upon the relevant information provided through research. This could be a catalyst for reimagining state-required clinical experiences, which may, in turn, positively impact teacher recruitment and retention.

Limitations

Merriam (2009) stated that the purpose of qualitative research is to “understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 5), which is highly dependent upon the participants’ interpretations of an event or phenomenon. Likewise, researchers depend upon their interpretations of the data to develop patterns of meaning (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, about research methodology, this study may exhibit the same limitations as other qualitative studies in that it is highly contextual and based upon the interpretations of humans (Merriam, 2009).

An additional limitation is that the study involved 35 student teachers placed in a clinical experience in various southwest Missouri public schools. An expanded study involving more participants over a greater geographic area would benefit future research. Longitudinal studies tracking retention rates and teaching effectiveness of hybrid model graduates would determine which elements best combine financial sustainability with quality preparation. Case studies of successful EPP-district partnerships should examine organizational structures that facilitate effective collaboration, particularly for hybrid preparation models that integrate strengths from traditional and alternative approaches. Expanded research would help create teacher preparation pathways that are both accessible and effective.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

1. What have been your greatest challenges throughout the program?
2. What have been your greatest rewards throughout the program?
3. In what ways did MSSU Teacher Education provide support throughout your program and professional semester?
4. In what ways did your Employing or Sponsoring District support you throughout your program and professional semester?
5. In what ways could MSSU Teacher Education have better supported you during your professional semester?
6. In what ways could your Employing or Sponsoring District have better supported you during your professional semester?