Development and Evolution of Clinical Partnerships:
Perspectives of K-12 Leaders

Objectives

It is well documented that one of the most significant aspects of educator preparation has been and continues to be clinical experiences in K-12 schools (AACTE, 2010, 2018; Zeichner, 2021). Furthermore, there is a demonstrated relationship between the success of a teacher candidate and strong clinical preparation (AACTE, 2010, 2018). Clearly colleges and universities rely on their relationships with their K-12 partners to prepare future educators (AASCU, 2016; AACTE, 2010, 2018). "The mutual understanding and trust cultivated by such partnerships can provide powerful and reciprocal benefits for all parties" (AASCU, 2016, p.21). Relationships were proven to be key during the Covid-19 pandemic. The global pandemic has affected K-12 education and clinical practice would not be happening without the long-term relationships and partnerships with school districts.

The proposed paper will share the results of a research study focused on clinical experiences and school-college partnerships in the state. The purpose of the study was to examine the dynamic nature, evolution, and aspirations of partnerships between two colleges and their Educator Preparation Program (EPP) partners in K-12 schools. Capturing the voices of the school leaders was essential to fully understand the ways in which the partnerships evolve. Highly effective school-EPP partnerships equally value the contributions of all stakeholders. Interviews were conducted with school leaders from six partner schools throughout the state to gain their critical viewpoints of the ways in which their schools engaged in this critical collaboration.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do school leaders describe the nature and extent of school-EPP partnerships?
2. What do school leaders identify as the benefits, challenges, and barriers?
3. How do school leaders perceive efficacy of school-EPP partnerships in the context of the NH IHE Conceptual Framework?

Theoretical framework

Theoretical/conceptual framework (Figure 1) frames the types of relationships EPPs have with schools and districts. The x-axis represents the spectrum of relationships with schools ranging from placements to partnerships. On one end of the spectrum teacher candidates can be placed in schools and EPP faculty focus their energy on the supervision of the teacher candidate. These are often one-time opportunities, unidirectional, and focus solely on supporting the teacher candidate. In many respects this is the "traditional" relationship EPPs have had with schools. The other end of the spectrum reflects a true partnership which aspires to reflect the guiding principles outlined in the conceptual framework while supporting the development of EPP candidates in the field. The y-axis represents the range of field experiences for EPP candidates. Educator Preparation candidates participate in early field experiences (e.g., site-based courses, freshman through junior year experiences) through intensive and immersive clinical experiences (e.g., student teaching, internships, capstone experiences).

The following three principles are presented as general guidelines for what constitutes a foundation for a high quality school-university partnership. These guidelines evolved from subcommittee meetings, an initial literature review, and statewide partnership meetings. The first underlying principle is that partnerships improve K-12 achievement. Student learning is at the core of school-university partnerships. The primary goal of a partnership is to improve teaching, learning (Heafner, McIntyre, & Spooner, 2015) and ultimately improve schools.

Second, partnerships foster a culture of adult lifelong learning. Emphasis is that teaching is a profession not an occupation. Communities of practice elevate the teaching profession and improve educator preparation. Clinical practice affords teacher candidates the opportunity to learn how to do the work of teaching, rather than just theorize. Furthermore, EPPs connect theory to practice in clinical placements with corresponding coursework with intent of developing correlating projects and experiences that show how theory informs practice (AACTE, 2010; Allsopp, DeMarie, Alvarez-McHatton, & Doone, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2010). Clinical partnerships improve our profession through clinically rich practice in teacher education such as: "look and learn, teaching rounds, talks with teachers, scavenger hunts, and the supported collaborative teaching model" (Dresden, Kittleson, & Wenner, 2014, p.43).

The third foundational principle is that partnerships are bidirectional and mutually beneficial. Effective school-university partnerships share vision and values (Snyder, 2005) while remaining sensitive to goals of the school and the context where clinical educators practice. In addition, effective partnerships collaborate and share decision-making on curriculum development activities, professional learning, and applied research to solidify long-term partnerships (Robinson & Darling-Hammond, 2005). "Collaboration occurs through mutual problem solving on issues related to student learning, shared teaching at the university and schools, and cooperative, innovative supervision of teacher candidates" (Boyle-Baise & McIntyre, 2008).

Research Design

This study employed mixed-methods, specifically a concurrent triangulation design. The purpose of this design was "to obtain different but complementary data on the same topic" (Morse, 1991, p. 122). It involved the concurrent, but separate, collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data in order to gain a better understanding of the research problem. This study employed semi-structured interviews in which the participants were comfortable speaking about their experiences, yet the researchers were able to follow the interview protocol. In addition, a partnership evaluation survey tool was administered post-interview to participants, guided by the conceptual framework.

To provide depth, interviews were conducted, using a video conferencing platform (e.g. Zoom). Each of the initial interviews included a leader within the school who was purposefully selected because of their significant and historical experience with the research problem. These sites were sampled for diversity (two each from elementary, middle, and high schools) that partner in clinical experiences with a either a representative public or private IHE within the state.
Each participant shared their unique stories and experiences regarding university partnerships within their school (Patton, 2015). These interviews occurred during two immediate and relevant contextual conditions: (a) pandemic and recoupment, and (b) chronic and extreme personnel shortages within the schools.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed immediately after the interview. Interview data analysis began as the research team first independently open coded the focus group interview transcripts labeling excerpts of data to summarize what the researchers saw in the data (Patton, 2015). After engaging in this initial independent open coding process, the researchers met to share, discuss, and begin categorizing the open codes into themes and patterns. Together, researchers compared the initial independently identified codes related to the research questions and collaboratively identified a set of shared codes related to the participants' perceptions of partnerships (Patton, 2015). During this stage of coding, the researchers shared their codes and notes, raised questions, offered suggestions, discussed limitations, insights, and thoughts about the emerging themes. In sum, an iterative comparative method of reflecting and exploring the data allowed emerging patterns to collectively come into focus (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Survey results coupled with the interview thematic analyses provided depth into how the school leaders perceive and experience partnerships and uncovered their thoughts, insights, feelings, struggles, and hopes. Finally, member checks of the findings were conducted with the candidates to confirm the study's findings and assertions.

The analysis resulted in the construction of a mosaic of the school leaders' collective lived experience using our theoretical/conceptual framework. The framework permitted the research team to highlight aspects of the school partners' perceptions. This conceptual framework helped organize the findings around four themes, described in the findings: (a) Partnerships should be *dynamic, responsive, and synergistic*; (b) The underlying *structure and integrity* of the partnership is critical; (c) *Are interns colleagues*? and finally, (d) The tension of *innovation v. stagnation* in partnerships is examined.

Research Findings:

Dynamic, Responsive, and Synergistic Partnerships:

Participants addressed a number of different themes surrounding the establishment and development of school-university partnerships. In particular, participants expressed frustrations with the complex nature of partnerships, expressing a triad of challenges maintaining dynamic, responsive, and synergistic partnerships between schools and universities. One participant stated:

> "The box of education itself is like origami and we're refolding it constantly. And so I just [compare] our higher education view [with our view] of the progression of a student teacher. We have to look at that. I think it doesn't reflect necessarily the progression of our school systems all the time"

Respondents repeatedly emphasized their perceptions that schools face constant situational challenges (i.e., pandemic, staffing shortages, etc.) and that "traditional" partnerships versus school site-responsive partnerships lack the ability to generate collaborative, responsive synergies to address them. Examples of these include internships that continue over two semesters, site (school) based cohort university classes, and early "step-up" programs that

progressively move students from intern to supported paid roles more efficiently, including year-long paid residencies for interns.

Underlying Structure and Integrity of the Partnership:

Respondents indicated that partnerships must be developed over a bedrock of practices that develop the underlying structure and integrity of the partnership. This bedrock influences the subsequent adaptability and responsiveness of the partnership. Respondents indicated several practices that facilitate this, including streamlining continuous and timely communication between the university and school to break down the "red tape" of initial placement, mentor pairing, and feedback. "Co-construction" of the internship is needed to "break down barriers", so that university personnel and school staff move past visits for "observation only" and become more immersed in the school and classroom culture. Lastly, the importance of mid-program experiences to affirm or re-assess career choice is needed- School leaders expressed a desire to allow teacher candidates more opportunities to assess whether a teaching role is the best path for them before engaging in an extended "capstone" internship.

Culture of interns as colleagues, or interns as visitors?

Respondents revisited the theme of reciprocal benefit in partnerships. They especially valued promoting the benefit for veteran school teachers in a partnership, helping them to question the *status quo* in practices. How is the dissonance between the university classroom experience and school site practices examined, and how can universities move beyond an intern-only support model to a model of mutual benefit for the mentor teacher and the faculty at large within a school?

Innovation v. stagnation:

Respondents repeatedly stressed the need for innovation in partnerships, both at the dyad level (intern, mentor teacher) and at the institutional level (school, university). Respondents expressed the need to allow interns to "be more than interns". One respondent said: "I also think one of the challenges is that we aren't looking at how to expand the box. We're like, this is this. This is what student teaching box looks like…" One respondent wished that interns take more active role than simply moving from observation to student teaching:

> "I think the number one thing is to be able to open this up, and we're also bleeding tutors, which would also help our kids get the support that they need. So, selfishly, it would provide a trained group of people who want to work with students in the classes, working and getting paid for it and getting paid for it and then taking classes outside of it on weekends or at night or leaving. Maybe they only work until three o'clock every day so they can take a class at three thirty at the school"

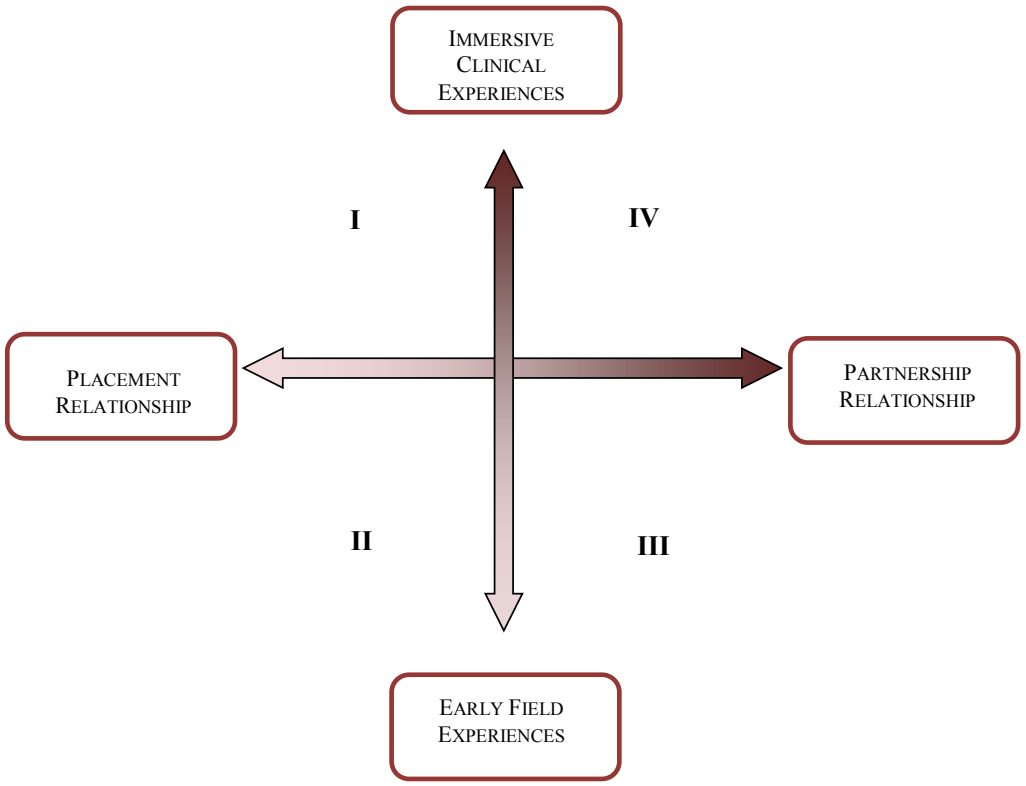
In such a statement, we see the respondent's desire to innovate to simultaneously address both compelling school student needs and expand the "box" of what a university student or intern can do. Lastly, we noted that some school leaders described their schools and partnerships simply in

historic or retrospective detail, the history of the *status quo*, versus school leaders that described how partnerships currently are either thriving and innovating, or are straining and stagnating.

Scholarly significance of the study

Research exploring the perspectives of school leaders in school-university partnerships is lacking in existing literature. Inquiry related to the role of school leaders and their insight and engagement that develops over time is essential to maintaining mutually beneficial relationships. Gaining this important perspective will inform other Educator Preparation programs of the ways in which they may support the growth of their own partnerships and enhance clinical practice with K-12 schools.

Figure 1: Nature of IHE Partnerships with P-12 Schools (IHE Network Partnership Subcommittee, 2016)



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