

The Need for Clear Definition of Terms

There is much confusion about professional experiences in teacher education and ongoing professional development. The confusion can be attributed to convolution of some key terms. In this abstract, the terms laboratory, field experience, clinical experiences, clinical teacher, and professional development school experiences are described as they relate to teacher education programs.

Laboratory Experiences. A laboratory experience is a direct or simulated activity which allows experimentation, observation, study, and analysis of educational events. Such experiences take place in controlled settings. The laboratory experience can vary in the level of complexity, however, the element of control of multiple variables in the environment is required, thus the structure of the educational event is well structured.

Although field experiences are often described as laboratory experiences, they too rarely permit sufficient control of the environment. A laboratory experience can be clinical or not clinical depending on the processes used. The obvious advantage of laboratory experiences is that they permit greater control, thus simplifying teaching phenomena thereby allowing novice teacher to analyze selected elements of an educational phenomenon with reduced risk.

Field Experiences. Field experiences are direct experiences with educational events occurring in natural environments. They are not simulated, seldom control many variables, and therefore are not considered laboratory experiences. Field experiences may be clinical in nature if participants are guided to engage in the clinical process, however many field experiences are not clinical by nature. Metcalf and Wilson (1994) point out that the increasing "saturation" of field sites resulting from growing demand for field-based experiences reduces the likelihood that such experiences will support genuinely clinical activities.

Clinical Experiences. Clinical experiences refer to any experience that takes place in a "clinical" setting that is educational, i.e., schools. The term clinical also describes a process of professional thought, reflection, and action that has unique problem-solving and problem finding components. Among these components are the following: evaluation of the present state of an environment, person/s, or situation; if a problem exists (learning or developmental) or if there is value in modifying the situation, alternatives are generated and weighed; the alternative that is believed to be most

desirable is enacted; and the results of this action are observed and evaluated. Thus clinical experience refers not so much to where the experience takes place, but rather to what kind of experience takes place.

Clinical Teachers. Clinical teachers refers to teachers who have received **substantial** training and education in facilitating clinical experiences. Thus, they not only are well versed in initiating clinical approaches, but they are able to facilitate clinical experiences (e.g., reflection, demonstration teaching, conferencing, clinical decision making) that are uniquely suited to the learning and developmental (psycho-social and moral) needs of each novice educator. They engage novice teachers in both university-based and school-based experiences that require clinical approaches, and they demonstrate caring and commitment to teacher development. Only recently has the field of teacher education begun to recognize the importance of preparing and supporting such clinical teachers or skilled mentors. Additionally, clinical teachers or clinical mentors would be knowledgeable about current trends across the teacher career continuum (preservice, induction, inservice).

Professional Development Schools. Professional development schools are public schools where a majority of the faculty have volunteered to support the professional development of teachers across the career span. Typically, such schools have formalized agreements with colleges or universities, and there is more intensive interaction between faculty and classroom teachers. Such schools provide direct experiences with educational events or learning and developmental phenomena. They rarely provide simulated experiences, and seldom control more than a small number of critical variables in the schooling environment. Although they can serve as clinical experiences if they permit the novice teacher to engage in the clinical process, they are not clinical by nature.

Metcalf, K., & Wilson, M. (1994). Improving the efficacy of on-campus laboratory experiences using the Myers-Briggs type indicator. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 27(2), 89-101.

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Additional information on clinical and mentoring experiences can be found in the text: [Mentoring and Supervision for Teacher Development](#). Reiman, Thies-Sprinthall (1998). New York: Longman

