NEPC Review: 2020 Teacher Prep Review: Clinical Practice and Classroom Management (National Council on Teacher Quality, October 2020)

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Executive Summary

NCTQ's *2020 Teacher Prep Review* focuses on two areas of teacher preparation: clinical practice and classroom management. The report uses an approach that is now familiar to readers of NCTQ publications: asserting a set of preferred practices and then applying those criteria to teacher education programs. For this report, the authors reviewed over 2,400 such programs, including what NCTQ terms "traditional" and "alternative" programs. Regarding clinical practice, the report asserts that although many programs now require longer field placements and offer candidates more field-based supervision, 90% of reviewed programs do not screen their mentor teachers "effectively," resulting in little to no improvement on the NCTQ criteria since the organization began rating teacher preparation programs. However, the report does find significant improvement in the adherence to the five classroom management strategies it designates as evidence-based practices. Although NCTQ reports have been critiqued for their limited use of research and highly questionable research methodology, this report employs the same approaches as earlier NCTQ reports. Rather than analyzing the characteristics of successful programs preparing teachers for a wide range of contexts, the report is based exclusively on adherence to or compliance with NCTQ internal standards that are neither widely accepted nor evidence-based. Thus, the report's value is diminished and is unlikely to transform teacher preparation.

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I. Introduction

The National Council of Teacher Quality (NCTQ) defines its mission as examining teacher preparation programs, recommending improvements, and identifying exemplary programs and practices.[1] Founded in 2001, the council conducts large-scale program reviews. Following its development of standards for measuring program quality, in 2013 NCTQ began conducting annual reviews of teacher preparation programs in the United States by collecting public documents with or without programs' consent. The widely disseminated reviews—which reflect degrees of alignment between programs' policies and practices and NCTQ standards— publicly grade and rank programs. This NEPC review focuses on NCTQ's most recent report, the *2020 Teacher Prep Review: Clinical Practice and Classroom Management*.[2]

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

This report reviewed over 2,400 teacher preparation programs, focusing on two areas: clinical practice and classroom management. NCTQ considers most of the reviewed programs, which represent all 50 states and the District of Columbia, to be "traditional." It labels only 59 reviewed programs (including residency programs) as "alternative route." The report begins by acknowledging COVID's impact on teaching and learning, a factor absent in its findings.

The report is based on internally developed standards. NCTQ evaluated programs' approaches to clinical practice according to three features: required length of clinical experiences; quantity and components of program-sponsored teacher candidate observations; and mentor teacher selection processes. It evaluated programs' approaches to teaching about classroom management based on the presence or absence of five classroom management strategies in observation instruments used to evaluate candidates during clinical practice. The report presents findings and recommendations for both clinical practice and classroom management.

The report argues that greater alignment between NCTQ's standards and programs' practices signals a higher quality program, and lesser alignment a lower quality one. To represent degrees of purported quality—which are actually degrees of compliance—the report assigns each program a letter grade (A-F).

Specifically, the report offers the following assessments.

Clinical Practice

Only 3% of traditional programs received an A for their approaches to clinical practice, with more than 90% of traditional programs receiving a C or D. The report asserts that although most (78%) traditional programs include at least one semester of clinical practice and many (71%) also provide at least four formal candidate observations, few (about 10%) meet NCTQ's criteria for mentor teacher selection. The report offers little data about the length of clinical experiences or supervision practices in alternative programs. However, it asserts that many more alternative (55%) than traditional (10%) programs screen mentor teachers according to student learning measures.

Classroom Management

Citing one study, the report asserts that students learn 20% more when teachers create a "positive" classroom environment. Assuming that a "positive" environment is the product of classroom management, the report offers as a major conclusion that there was a 26% increase in the number of programs that taught five specific classroom management strategies. The report also concludes that using praise to control behavior is the most important, though most infrequently used strategy. Importantly, use is defined by a strategy's appearance on an observational checklist.

Based on the above sets of findings, the report offers the following three recommendations:

1. "Educator programs and K-12 school partners should form meaningful clinical practice partnerships and work together to improve clinical experiences."[3]
2. "To strengthen clinical experiences, educator prep programs should place an emphasis on selecting strong mentor teachers."[4]
3. "To strengthen training in classroom management, programs should adopt obser-

vation and evaluation forms that provide comprehensive feedback to their student teachers."[5]

III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

On its website, NCTQ explains that the organization "conduct[s] research to assist states, districts, and teacher prep programs with teacher quality issues" claiming that conducting reviews of teacher preparation programs, in particular, will aid in "modernizing the teaching profession".[6]

NCTQ's 2020 Teacher Prep report is premised on three assumptions that are similar to the assumptions undergirding its 2018 report.[7] Like the prior report, the 2020 report is grounded in notions of practice and teacher learning that assume that particular technical components of clinical practice inevitably lead to teacher learning and improved practice for all teachers, in all contexts. Second and relatedly, the report assumes that classroom management can be reduced to a discrete set of universal practices that can be observed and measured by a predetermined checklist that doesn't account for teacher knowledge, teacher and student identities, and classroom, school, and district contexts. Third, the report assumes that a methodology relying exclusively on review of publicly available program artifacts is a valid approach for determining program quality.

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report largely ignores the body of empirical literature that investigates clinical practice and classroom management. Referencing few research studies and grounding its standards in only a handful of others—most over 10 years old—the report reads as more ideological than empirical. In addition, summaries of existing literature are often oversimplified, with only those select portions that advance NCTQ's own aims foregrounded.

Clinical Practice

The report asserts that "evidence for the importance of high-quality clinical experiences is undeniable," yet cites only one report and one policy brief as substantiation.[8] Considerable scholarly literature supports the idea that high-quality clinical experiences matter.[9] However, in failing to reference this literature, the report overlooks key aspects of clinical experience shown to contribute to preservice teachers' opportunities to learn,[10] and offers an overly simplistic view of what "high quality" means, emphasizing the importance only of blunt features like clinical experience length, number of university-sponsored observations, and mentor screening processes. Thus, the report obscures more nuanced research-based dimensions of clinical experience that account for candidates' learning, including course as-

signments, the quality of cooperating teachers' mentoring, and additional forms of support from university supervisors.[11] The report also overlooks research that underscores the role of contextual features in shaping field experience quality, including such factors as student population, teacher candidates' social and cultural identities, and a placement's policy context.[12]

Of particular note is the exclusion of scholarship that centers equity and justice. Missing, for example, is research that illustrates how learning to teach and teaching are highly complex activities that emerge through relationships between teacher educators, teachers, and learners within a historical context.[13] This exclusion enables the reduction of quality indicators to a set of decontextualized practices that frame learning to teach as neutral and culture-free, while also obscuring systemic, structural injustices in education.

Finally, although the report appropriately notes the challenge for teacher preparation programs to increase their involvement in mentor teacher selection, largely because this has traditionally been the purview of placement schools, it offers a reductive notion of what more involvement would entail by suggesting that "highly-effective" teachers are necessarily highly-effective mentors. The report does not provide a clear definition of what "highly-effective" means, instead relying on the way that a single article identified high-quality mentors. This article claims that students' standardized scores should be used as an indicator of teacher effectiveness,[14] a notion not generally accepted by scholars.[15] Notably, the NCTQ report departs from the central argument of this article, which explicitly cautions against blaming teacher educators for challenges associated with mentor teacher selection. In contrast to the article, NCTQ names a "lack of agency on the part of teacher preparation programs over the all-important selection of the mentor teacher."[16] It further ignores and then obscures the complex array of challenges associated with recruiting high-quality mentor teachers through its narrow reviews of teacher preparation programs

Classroom Management

The report's conclusions about classroom management rest on the notion that there are five universally accepted, research-based strategies that have "positive effects" on students' behavior. This understanding is premised on a 2008 meta-analysis focused on "behavior interventions."[17]

Citing well-known research that emphasizes praising effort rather than ability,[18] the report makes the claim that a specific kind of praise is critical for "effective" classroom management. This, however, is the only section that cites research apart from the scant research behind what the report claims as "universal" standards. Our review of research did not reveal a single set of strategies that apply to all classrooms. Rather, there is a stronger emphasis on centering teacher-student relationships, cultural contexts, the diversity of students, and variation in classroom settings.[19] An examination of research reveals no studies that identified what the NCTQ report claims are universally accepted strategies.

Most notably absent are studies on various forms of diversity and classroom management,[20] including those that emphasize the importance of students' identities and the cultural prac-

tices and knowledge students bring to the classroom.[21] In addition, many studies address the disproportional number of behavioral referrals, suspensions, and expulsion of students of color, students from low SES backgrounds, and students with learning differences.[22] This finding is critical because Black males have been disproportionately affected by teachers who spent excessive time controlling and punishing students,[23] a tendency that has been linked to the school- to-prison pipeline.[24]

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The primary method of data collection for this and all NCTQ reports is document review of teacher preparation program materials, including publicly available catalogues, handbooks, and syllabi. When programs have refused to submit documents, NCTQ has solicited information through online searches, open record requests, student and faculty solicitations, and, in some cases, lawsuits.

For the clinical practice review, the report requested documents, including syllabi, program descriptions and policies, contracts with school districts, forms completed by prospective mentor teachers and school districts, and correspondence. NCTQ personnel made no program site visits and conducted no observations or interviews of people involved in program design, or of faculty teaching or candidates participating in programs. Analysts were tasked with looking for specific low-inference information: the defined period of student teaching, the frequency of observations by supervisors, and the selection practices for mentor teachers. To evaluate the classroom management standard, programs were asked to provide instruments used to observe and evaluate teacher candidates and first-year teachers, as well as rubrics or scoring documents.

The main criteria for scoring were whether programs met NCTQ's exact standards. When programs did not provide requested data, NCTQ used publicly available data and often gave them scores of D or F. The report lists exemplary programs—those that received an F in the first edition and were evaluated as an A in 2020. This grade change seems related to programs' increased compliance, rather than a reflection of genuine efforts to improve candidate learning or to graduate more successful teachers.

We worry that this methodology violates ethical principles of research by punishing those programs that opt out of the review, often for principled reasons. These scores are often reported in local newspapers.

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report offers a few reasonable and research-driven assertions that undergirds its recommendations, including that mentor teachers matter; that programs would likely benefit from greater investment in mentor teachers; that programs and districts ought to work in closer

partnership to support candidate learning; and that observations of candidates during clinical experiences may offer opportunities to focus on key dimensions of classroom management.[25] In addition, the report concludes that there is general consensus that new teachers claim their programs do not adequately prepare them in classroom management.

However, as Marilyn Cochran-Smith and her colleagues noted in their review of NCTQ's *2018 Teacher Prep Review*, the validity of the report rests on the validity of the report's various components, including its rationale, engagement with scholarly literature, and methodological approach.[26] As described above, these components are weak. The report rests on three assumptions that are questionable in light of their limited empirical support: that isolated, technical components of clinical practice engender teacher learning and improved teaching practice; that classroom management can be reduced to a discrete set of universal practices that can be observed and measured by a predetermined checklist; and that a methodology based on the review of publicly available program artifacts, measured against internally derived standards, is a valid approach for determining program quality. The report's limited use of research likewise raises questions about validity.

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

The report claims to be an arbiter of which programs meet evidence-based standards, yet uses invalid measurements, draws on a limited research base, and relies on questionable methods. Therefore, this report is of little use. Its oversimplified interpretations and limited use of existing research additionally undermine possibilities for generating results that would ignite program improvement beyond incremental, technical changes. This is especially true for programs that prioritize educational equity and justice, given their particular need for contextually sensitive treatments of clinical practice and classroom management. NCTQ claims to be "committed to modernizing the teaching profession,"[27] yet this report relies on outdated research and ideas, and presses teacher preparation programs to adopt practices that neither reflect current innovations in teacher preparation nor address the current needs of U.S. teachers and students. Finally, although the report opens with urgent calls to improve teacher quality in the midst of educational struggles suffered because of COVID-19, the report fails to provide useful information that might help programs understand how they might respond to this context.

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