Designed for the Digital Age: Teacher Preparation at TEACH-NOW Graduate School of Education

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, several novel approaches to teacher preparation have emerged to challenge the dominance of university-based programs. Included in those approaches are two well-publicized, but little-researched phenomena: new graduate schools of education (nGSEs) and fully online teacher preparation. Drawing on data generated from a comprehensive qualitative case study of one institution, this article offers a theorized profile of teacher preparation at the intersection of these two phenomena. Based on a systematic analysis, it details the conceptualization and enactment of teacher preparation at TEACH-NOW Graduate School of Education, a fully online nGSE.

Editor's Note: This article is part of a special issue of *The New Educator* on the topic of teacher preparation at new graduate schools of education (nGSEs) (Cochran-Smith, Carney, & Miller, 2016). This term refers to the small, but growing phenomenon in the United States of new graduate schools that prepare and endorse teachers for certification and award master's degrees, but are not university-based or formally affiliated with universities as knowledge brokers or degree-granting bodies. The issue draws on data and analyses from a larger Spencer Foundation-funded study of teacher preparation at nGSEs. The issue's first article locates nGSEs within the context of larger policy, political, and professional trends and describes the larger study. This is followed by four articles, including this one, each of which offers a theorized profile of teacher preparation at one nGSE. The issue concludes with an article that offers a multiple-case perspective by looking across the four profiles.

As part of the larger study, the four cases were chosen for in-depth analysis not only for their "instrumental" (Stake, 2006) value as instances of the phenomenon of teacher preparation at nGSEs, but also for their "intrinsic" individual interest (Stake, 2006) – that is, their high visibility, media attention, and/or institutional and programmatic innovations. Thus, each case profile in this issue, which is intended to capture the essence of the individual case, analyzes how teacher preparation is conceptualized and enacted in relation to

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its institutional environment, including its practices, structures, environmental rules, traditions, and beliefs. Because each case site was selected in part because it was different from the others and was intrinsically interesting, the authors of these four articles use different, situationally-relevant theoretical frameworks, concepts, and analytic tools to construct the profiles in addition to the frameworks of the larger study. It is also important to note that none of the researchers involved in this study is or was affiliated with any of the nGSEs studied. The four analyses are not intended to speak with one voice or echo one interpretive line; rather, they vary according to the unique aspects of each case. It is important to note, however, that although each of the four profiles is designed to stand alone, it is also linked to all the articles in the issue. Readers will gain the richest interpretation of what makes teacher preparation at nGSEs make sense to their participants and what the controversies are regarding this new phenomenon by reading across the articles in the issue.

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In recent decades, several novel teacher preparation approaches have emerged to challenge the dominance of college- and university-based programs (Liu, 2013; Schneider, 2018; Zeichner, 2014, 2016), including both new graduate schools of education (nGSEs) and fully online teacher preparation. Both nGSEs and fully online teacher preparation represent reforms that diverge from "traditional" pathways into the teaching profession. Established since the year 2000, nGSEs are independent, non-university-based graduate schools that are state-authorized to prepare teachers, endorse certification, and confer degrees (Cochran-Smith et al., 2020). Meanwhile, fully online teacher preparation relocates programs from the physical environments of brick-and-mortar institutions to the digital environments of the internet. Based on a comprehensive case study of one such institution (Carney, 2019) conducted as part of a larger study of the nGSE phenomenon (see Cochran-Smith, 2020), this article offers a theorized profile of teacher preparation at the intersection of these two phenomena by detailing the conceptualization and enactment of teacher preparation at TEACH-NOW Graduate School of Education (TEACH-NOW), a fully online nGSE.[1]

Drawing on the findings and analysis of that case study, the theorized profile below argues that as a fully online nGSE, TEACH-NOW sought to be regarded as an innovative and legitimate teacher preparation provider (Carney, 2019). Designed for teacher candidates of the digital age, TEACH-NOW thus operated at the center of a complex tension between the push for innovation and the pull of legitimation and skillfully managed that tension by

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[1]On July 9, 2020, the Higher Education Licensing Commission of Washington, D.C. approved a name change for TEACH-NOW Graduate School of Education – Moreland University; The TEACH-NOW Teacher Preparation Certificate Program will continue to exist under the Moreland University umbrella. Given its new status as a university, the institution no longer fits with our definition of nGSEs. However, all of the data about TEACH-NOW in this and other articles in this issue were obtained while it was an nGSE.

establishing tight coherence around indicators of innovation and markers of legitimacy.

Related literature

The comprehensive case study of teacher preparation at TEACH-NOW that serves as the basis for this profile was informed by Garrison's (2011, 2017) theory related to e-learning in higher education and Turkle's (Turkle, 2011, 2015, 2017) notions about human-technology relationships. Specifically, data analysis and interpretation were guided by Garrison's Community of Inquiry (CoI) theory, which offered a framework for unpacking the social, teaching, and cognitive elements of TEACH-NOW's e-learning environment. Meanwhile, Turkle's ideas about the complexities of society's reliance on technology provided insight regarding the impact of TEACH-NOW's technology-centric approach on program participants. Additionally, Hammerness's (2006) and Tatto's (1996) conceptions of coherence in teacher preparation helped to shed light on TEACH-NOW's consistent and structured approach to preparation.

In keeping with the larger nGSE study (see Cochran-Smith, 2020), the theorized profile in this article also draws on institutional theory. Specifically, the profile was informed by Scott's (2014) notion of the relationship between three central institutional pillars – regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive – and legitimacy. Scott suggests that from a "strong institutional perspective, legitimacy is not a commodity to be possessed or exchanged but a condition reflecting perceived consonance with relevant rules and laws or normative values, or alignment with cultural-cognitive frameworks" (p. 72). Scott's regulative and normative pillars and the idea of legitimacy as reflected through accordance with relevant rules and values was particularly informative in making sense of TEACH-NOW's efforts to signal its legitimacy.

Along with the theoretical underpinnings described above, three bodies of research provided important insight to the case study: research on nGSEs, research on fully online teacher preparation, and research on synchronous online classes in higher education. The contrasting positions reflected in the small body of extant literature on nGSEs (e.g., Caillier & Riordan, 2009; Kronholz, 2012; Zeichner, 2016) underscored the need for independent empirical studies based on access to participants, materials, and program structures. In addition, existing empirical research on fully online teacher preparation (e.g., Faulk & King, 2013; Leader-Janssen, Nordness, Swain, & Hagaman, 2016; Stricklin & Tingle, 2016) suggested that as the field of initial teacher education continues to evolve beyond the time and distance constraints of face-to-face preparation programs, the ongoing exploration of the impact of digital technologies on preparation programs remains important. Finally, research on the use of synchronous online classes in higher education

(e.g., Malczyk, 2018; McDaniels, Pfund, & Bamicle, 2016; Wagner, Enders, Pirie, & Thomas, 2016) offered guidance related to the benefits and challenges of a major component of TEACH-NOW's program – its use of real-time virtual classes.

Methodology

The methodology of the qualitative case study (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014) upon which this profile is based was aligned with the design of the larger nGSE research study described in the first article of this issue (Cochran-Smith, 2020). As part of that larger study, TEACH-NOW was one of four nGSE sites purposefully selected for maximum variation (Patton, 2005). Intended to be descriptive and interpretive, the case study sought to understand – but not to evaluate or judge – how teacher preparation was conceptualized and enacted at TEACH-NOW (Carney, 2019).

Overview of case study site

At the time of data generation for the case study, the goal of TEACH-NOW was to "prepare tomorrow's teachers for tomorrow's learners in tomorrow's learning world" (TEACH-NOW, 2018a, para. 4). Physically headquartered in Washington, D.C., TEACH-NOW began as a small certification-only program in late 2011, but quickly evolved into an accredited institution of higher education with preparation program approval in Arizona and Washington, D.C. By late 2018, the institution had enrolled over 3,000 in-service and prospective teachers from over 110 countries with a 95% student completion rate (Document, "TN History").

TEACH-NOW offered a pathway to licensure in dozens of subject areas via two preparation options: a 9-month certification-only program that cost 6000 USD and a 12-month certification plus M.Ed. program that cost 13,000 USD (TEACH-NOW, 2018b). Prospective candidates had to have a bachelor's degree and content-area knowledge and were required to complete an online application that included essay, transcript, and identification requirements. The institution preferred applicants with a 3.0 grade point average or higher and also evaluated them based on their professional experience and passion for education. In order to be granted licensure, candidates needed to pass state certification exams, which assessed content knowledge and other skills (TEACH-NOW, 2018b, 2018c).

TEACH-NOW relied on its proprietary e-learning platform to deliver its module-based program to a candidate population comprised of a mix of both prospective and uncertified in-service teachers. Candidates used the platform to access their assignments, learning resources, and synchronous virtual classes hosted on Zoom. The certification-only program was comprised of eight

modules, and the certification plus degree program was comprised of eleven. The eighth module in both programs was a 12-week face-to-face clinical experience (TEACH-NOW, 2018d). For those clinical experiences, TEACH-NOW's staff assisted candidates who were not already working in schools in finding appropriate school placements and cooperating mentors near their particular physical locales. In-service candidates unable to identify a cooperating mentor in their schools were allowed to work with a "virtual mentor" provided by TEACH-NOW. Given that a majority of TEACH-NOW's candidates chose to enroll in the certification-only program, it was the focus of the case study.

Data sources

The case study was based on more than 150 data sources generated from February to December 2018 including documents, online materials, interviews, and observations (Carney, 2019). Documents included program materials such as handbooks and manuals as well as internal PowerPoints and reports such as quality assurance plans and other accreditation-related materials. Online materials included publicly available data such as popular press articles and webpages from the institution's website as well as internal, proprietary materials sourced from its learning platform. Observation data were generated from a total of 15 direct observations of both live and recorded virtual classes and other program events selected in consultation with program participants. Administrators, instructors, mentors, candidates, and graduates were invited to be participants in the case study, and administrators aided in participant recruitment. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 TEACH-NOW participants: six current and one former administrator, six instructors, three mentors, seven candidates, and three graduates. Three participants participated in follow-up interviews.

Data analysis was multi-phased. Using the research software, Dedoose, data were carefully organized, prepared, and coded (Tracy, 2013; Yin, 2014). Coding and analysis drew on Erickson's (1986) notion of assertion-development and Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's (2014) notions related to "pattern coding" (p. 86). Primary and sub-codes reflected categorical and thematic patterns and led to the development of higher-level explanations (Miles et al., 2014), which allowed assertions to be tested and, ultimately, for evidence-based conclusions to be drawn.

Teacher preparation innovation and legitimation at TEACH-NOW

Case study findings revealed that TEACH-NOW adeptly managed the tension between the push to be an innovative teacher preparation provider and the pull to be viewed as a legitimate program by establishing tight coherence around indicators of innovation and markers of legitimacy (Carney, 2019). As detailed

in the profile below, the case study found that the innovation-legitimation push-pull dynamic was at the center of how TEACH-NOW conceptualized and enacted teacher preparation for the digital age and was reflected in both its institutional context as well as the structure and content of its certification program. In terms of its institutional context, TEACH-NOW exhibited innovation through its business model, which emphasized affordability, efficiency, and technology. The institution balanced that innovative business model with the legitimation gained from specific markers of institutional credibility (Scott, 2014). In relation to the structure and content of its teacher certification program, TEACH-NOW employed an approach to program delivery and design that diverged from more "traditional" face-to-face pathways. That innovative program structure was then balanced through the legitimation gained from the implementation of program content that drew on respected knowledge sources.

Institutional context

As both Turkle (2017) and Garrison (2017) emphasize, today's technology-enabled connectivity allows for access and interaction that would have been impossible just a few decades ago. According to Turkle (2017), "The global reach of connectivity can make the most isolated outpost into a center of learning and economic activity" (p. 152). As evidenced by its mission statement, TEACH-NOW maximized such connectivity by leveraging 21st century technology to serve a global population of candidates: "TEACH-NOW's mission is to teach teachers around the world to be resourceful problem solvers and tech-savvy educators through an online, collaborative, activity-based learning system designed for tomorrow's students in a dynamic and diverse world" (Document, "Program Fact Sheet," p. 1).

Accordingly, TEACH-NOW's for-profit, tuition-driven business model responded to market demands and utilized technology to offer an affordable, efficient experience. At the same time, however, in conceptualizing and enacting its approach, case study data also suggested that TEACH-NOW understood the importance of assuring prospective candidates that it was a legitimate organization. That understanding was in line with the notion that institutions require legitimacy in order to survive and grow (Scott, 2014). Analysis of interview data as well as of internal and publicly available documents revealed that coherent understandings (Hammerness, 2006; Tatto, 1996) about accreditation, staffing, and affiliations helped TEACH-NOW provide assurances of legitimacy.

Innovation through its business model

TEACH-NOW was established because its founder/CEO, a well-known figure in teacher education with a background in alternate routes, saw an opportunity for innovation in the preparation marketplace:

> And all my life, all my career, the focus was always on how can we fix this? … What do we need to do to improve the way we prepare teachers? What do we need to do to make certification more sensible and reasonable? I thought a lot about that, and then I just said, "Somebody really does need to go back to the drawing board and work [on] the approach of fixing this." (Interview, Founder/CEO)

In creating a "more sensible and reasonable" approach, the CEO envisioned an online program that utilized technology and emphasized digital skills:

> The decision was made that it had to be online, it had to be technology-savvy. What we did that sets it apart from what anybody else is doing, is that we did go back to the drawing board and create it from scratch. (Interview, Founder/CEO)

It is important to note that the assertion that teacher preparation needed to be recreated points to several underlying assumptions about the state and purpose of the teacher preparation. First, the founding of TEACH-NOW reflected the claim that "traditional" teacher preparation inadequately addressed the needs of today's candidates and *P*-12 students. In addition, TEACH-NOW's conceptualization was based on the idea that the "fix" for teacher preparation had to involve technology and thus reflected confidence in the transformational capacity of e-learning (Garrison, 2017). As a result, TEACH-NOW leaders assumed that candidates could be prepared for the face-to-face work of *P*-12 teaching in digital spaces and that technology could and *should* play a central role in their preparation.

Consequently, TEACH-NOW employed what the institution described as a "unique" business model:

> [TEACH-NOW] would be the first organization to provide a scalable, individualized, low cost, efficient, as needed basis option to teacher candidates. Several very costly efforts had been advanced [by others] in the [teacher preparation] market with varying degrees of success. TEACH-NOW's approach was unique. It could be standards-based and research-based and be low cost and highly efficient. (Document, "Brief Historical Overview," p. 2)

As the above description suggests, TEACH-NOW's business model operated based on the assumption that there was a market for flexible, low-cost, and efficient teacher preparation. Interview data indicated that the assumptions driving TEACH-NOW's business model were consistently understood by its leaders and instructors, who held coherent views about TEACH-NOW's aims, the shortcomings of "traditional" programs, and the needs of today's preparation consumers.

It is also crucial to note that TEACH-NOW was a tuition-driven, for-profit company helmed by a formidable chief executive officer as opposed to a public and/or privately-supported nonprofit organization. As one administrator stated, "We're a for-profit company, and our funding is entirely through candidate enrollments, so entirely through the tuition that we charge" (Interview, Administrator C). The CEO expanded upon the notable cost-saving benefits of

their business model and position as a digital entity: "We're 100% tuition-based. When you're not building buildings and planting ivy to grow up, you don't need that money . . . Having it all online and virtual is a tremendous cost-saving" (Interview, Founder/CEO). That cost-savings resulted in what that same administrator called "an extraordinary profit" (Interview, Founder/CEO). That statement aligns with a *Forbes* article, which reported that in 2016 alone, TEACH-NOW made more than 4 USD million in revenue at a 25-percent profit-margin (Stengel, 2017).

According to the CEO, TEACH-NOW's low-cost approach was intentional: "We made the tuition affordable … And we give people an interest-free payment plan." (Interview, Founder/CEO). TEACH-NOW instructors exhibited a shared understanding of the impact of the program's cost when discussing why candidates enrolled. For example, one instructor connected the cost to its streamlined approach: "Even in a world of online master's and things like that you couldn't find a place where you could walk out in a set amount of time with a set price tag and be done" (Interview, Instructor F).

Along similar lines, the 10 teacher candidates/graduates interviewed for the case study also identified TEACH-NOW's flexibility, efficiency and/or low cost as key factors in their enrollment. The thoughts of one candidate exemplify this: "I found out it was much cheaper and you can actually finish in nine months, and I thought, you know what, that I can afford and I get my certificate, what, within a year? … So I did it" (Interview, Candidate D). By employing an innovative business model that allowed for efficient and affordable preparation, TEACH-NOW offered candidates such as this one an alternative to longer, more expensive programs.

Legitimation through accreditation, staffing, and affiliations

At the time the data were generated for the case study, the first question listed on the "Frequently Asked Questions" portion of TEACH-NOW's website was: "Is this a real teaching certificate?" That question was followed by clear assurance: "Absolutely!" (TEACH-NOW, 2018c). TEACH-NOW's need to assert its legitimacy reflected an institutional awareness of consumer concerns about the program's departure from teacher preparation traditions. TEACH-NOW managed those concerns by deliberately achieving markers of credibility related to its institutional context. Specifically, TEACH-NOW signaled to prospective candidates that it was not only an innovative preparation provider but also a legitimate institution through accreditation, staffing, and affiliations.

According to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), "[A]ccreditation is a major way that students, families, government officials, and the press know that an institution or program provides a quality education" (Council for Higher Education Accreditation [CHEA], n.d.). The idea that accreditation is a marker of "a quality education" is consistent with the reasoning behind TEACH-NOW's pursuit of accreditation and in line with

Scott's (2014) notion that accreditation is often "employed as a prime indicator of legitimacy" (p. 73). The thoughts of one administrator illustrated that:

> Our candidates, you know, had questions about our accreditation … Basically, we took the bull by the horns and [sought accreditation] because that was something that our students wanted, that's something that we wanted … people around the world to know. That our program operates professionally. (Interview, Administrator E)

To indicate to the outside world that TEACH-NOW "operates professionally," the institution sought accreditation from two major accreditation bodies: the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC), an accreditor for post-secondary distance education institutions, and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), the major programmatic accreditor for teacher education in the United States. TEACH-NOW was accredited by DEAC in January 2017 and by CAEP the following April. TEACH-NOW's achievement of both DEAC and CAEP accreditation indicated that it met the accreditors' standards, and thus, helped to address consumer concerns connected to the institution's approach.

In addition to earning accreditation, TEACH-NOW worked to further strengthen its legitimacy by hiring instructors who were committed to its mission and exhibited coherent understandings about the purpose of teacher preparation. TEACH-NOW also required instructors to have at least three years of teaching experience and an expressed dedication to using technology and e-learning environments. In terms of their education backgrounds, all faculty members held or were working toward advanced degrees. Specifically, of the 42 faculty members listed in the candidate handbook, 41 had earned master's degrees and seven had earned terminal degrees (Document, *Catalog and Candidate Handbook)*. It must be noted that the education backgrounds of TEACH-NOW's faculty contrasted with "traditional" university-based programs where the vast majority of faculty hold terminal degrees. Instead, as its website emphasized, TEACH-NOW placed heavy value on *P*-12 classroom experience: "TEACH-NOW [f]aculty are master educators with many years' experience excelling in the classroom" (TEACH-NOW, 2018e, para. 1).

Another way in which TEACH-NOW worked to signal its legitimacy was through affiliations. As exhibited in the emphasis on affiliations and partnerships found in program materials and on its website, TEACH-NOW leaders understood the importance of being aligned with reputable individuals and organizations. Thus, TEACH-NOW had a four-person advisory council, which was made up of experienced leaders in teacher education and/or online learning and was "responsible for providing guidance and counseling to the President and CEO for all academic matters" (Document, *Catalog and Candidate Handbook*, p. 6). TEACH-NOW also formed partnerships with educational organizations including international nonprofits and for-profit teacher recruitment organizations. Those partnerships reflected TEACH-

NOW's global presence and helped to demonstrate its credibility to an international audience. In addition, TEACH-NOW's Veterans Initiative allowed those eligible to use G.I. Bill benefits to attend TEACH-NOW free of cost (TEACH-NOW, 2018f). Combined with its approach to staffing and accreditation, TEACH-NOW's affiliations served as markers of legitimacy to TEACH-NOW's candidates as well as to the wider teacher education community.

Program structure and content

TEACH-NOW's skillful navigation of the innovation-legitimation push-pull was also evident in the structure and curricular content of the certification program. TEACH-NOW conceptualized and enacted an innovative program structure that resulted in not only a cost-effective, efficient experience but also an experience that aimed to promote meaningful collaboration in digital spaces. At the same time, however, the institution's conceptualization and enactment of the content of its certification program reflected the pull of legitimacy in that it was rooted in the principles underlying the widely-used Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC) standards and also drew on the current movement toward practice-based preparation.

Innovation through program structure

To offer a streamlined experience, TEACH-NOW enrolled new candidates monthly (except in December). Additionally, and reflecting Turkle's (2017) assertion that technology fosters "a new notion of time" (p. 164), TEACH-NOW also did not have the breaks, vacations, or holidays of university-based preparation programs. Furthermore, TEACH-NOW did not follow a typical semester-based model nor did it offer the common course-based format employed by institutions of higher education. Instead, TEACH-NOW's innovative design and delivery utilized technology to support four key program elements: sequential modules, virtual classes, collaborative cohorts, and activities-based assessments.

Sequential modules. The first key element of the certification program was the use of online modules for content delivery – an approach consistent with Turkle's (2015) idea that technology has created a desire for streamlined productivity. Rather than multiple, semester-long courses, TEACH-NOW candidates progressed through what the institution described as "a series of intense, comprehensive modules of different lengths, taken in sequence" (Document, "Program Fact Sheet," p. 1). Accessed via its proprietary e-learning platform, each of the eight modules was made up of several units, and each unit was one week in length. In addition, each module translated to a specific number of credit hours. For example, the fourth module, "Managing the

Learning Environment," was comprised of six one-week-long units and successful completion earned a candidate three credits. One graduate interviewed praised TEACH-NOW's module-based approach and noted how it prompted a rethinking of traditional course-based approaches: "[T]he module-by-module format is so much more intuitive and so much more user-friendly. Really, doing it made me think back to college and made me think to myself . . . 'Why was I taking five classes at the same time?'" (Interview, Graduate B).

Virtual classes. The second key element to the structure of the program was the incorporation of weekly synchronous virtual classes, which fostered real-time interaction among participants across often vast physical distances. One instructor emphasized the visual and relational aspect of virtual classes: "It matters because it puts a human face to all this digital stuff" (Interview, Instructor B). Another instructor contrasted virtual classes with asynchronous online learning environments: "I think that because we use Zoom . . . that it's not like using Blackboard or Moodle where you never see anybody. There really is the personal element that's involved" (Interview, Instructor D). The idea that TEACH-NOWs virtual classes offered a "personal element" aligns with Garrison's (2017) emphasis on how communication and discourse are key in building participant trust and belonging in e-learning environments.

Collaborative cohorts. Positioned as "an essential ingredient" (Document, *Catalog and Candidate Handbook*, p. 21) of its program, collaborative candidate cohorts were the third key element of the structure of the program. TEACH-NOW assumed that in order to develop into effective educators, candidates needed to interact with and learn from not only their teacher educators and mentors but also from their fellow candidates. Accordingly, the institution employed a cohort model, which required a group of 12–15 candidates to meet in virtual classes and to collaborate inside and outside of class. TEACH-NOW's emphasis on collaboration reflects Garrison's (2017) suggestion that the "social presence" (p. 35) in e-learning environments plays an important role in establishing the "academic climate" (p. 38) by fostering community and inquiry amongst participants. To cultivate collaboration, instructors utilized the breakout room feature on Zoom to coordinate small group discussions and encourage candidate interaction (Observation, Module 5; Observation, Module 6) and also used virtual classes to organize group projects that involved candidate interaction outside of class (Observation, Module 3). It is important to note here that because TEACH-NOW attracted a geographically diverse population of candidates situated in a wide range of time zones, the formation of collaborative cohorts was based on candidates' individual availability and scheduling preferences. As a result, cohorts were often comprised not only of candidates representing many different geographic locations but also a variety of content areas and grade-levels.

Activities-based assessments. The fourth element of the structure of the program was based on the institution's emphasis on "learn by doing" (Document, *Mentor Handbook*, p. 5) and an understanding that demonstrating new learning was key to effective teacher preparation. The notion of "learn by doing" manifested through an activities-based assessment strategy, which represented a noted departure from the traditional assessment paradigm. Centered on a belief that "demonstrating new learning is a better measure of teacher effectiveness than traditional tests and assessments" (Document, *Curriculum Development Manual*, p. 4), TEACH-NOW employed an assessment strategy that did not include the examinations or research papers and essays often found at other institutions. Rather, analysis of the required activities revealed a focus on "problem-based" assignments and collaborative projects. Activities included co-planning classroom norms and procedures (Document, "Module 4, Unit 3, Activity 2"), designing formative assessments (Document, "Module 5, Unit 1, Activity 1"), and developing lesson plans (Document, "Module 7, Unit 2, Activity 1") and often required candidates to present in groups, use an array of digital tools, and reflect on their learning.

When combined, the four elements described above created an innovative yet coherent structure (Hammerness, 2006; Tatto, 1996) for candidate learning that seized upon 21st century societal norms related to multitasking and time management (Turkle, 2015, 2017), and thus, worked in service of TEACH-NOW's aim to be "a fast, flexible, and affordable option" (Document, "Program Fact Sheet," p. 1). Given its online nature, the design and delivery of the program was intended to function in concert with the institution's business model by offering candidates a convenient yet collaborative experience of learning to teach.

Legitimation through program content

The case study found that TEACH-NOW balanced the innovative aspects of its streamlined, technology-dependent program structure with the legitimation gained through the implementation of a professional curriculum based on respected knowledge sources (Carney, 2019). Before detailing those knowledge sources for this profile, however, it is important to point out that curricular content of the certification program also reflected what can be described as a *universal stance* on the nature of teaching that aimed to "prepare educators who are effective in helping *all* students learn" in "*any* learning environment" (Document, *Catalog and Candidate Handbook*, p. 4, emphasis added). Underlying these goals was a vision of good teaching that rested on the assumption that effective teaching strategies are applicable to any learning environment, regardless of subject-matter, grade-level, school, country, or culture. In other words, in contrast to programs that take a subject-specific or place-based approach to preparation, TEACH-NOW assumed all candidates could learn to teach effectively via the program's universalized

curriculum while grouped in cohorts comprised of candidates representing a range of subjects and levels.

To signal the legitimacy of that universal stance and of the program overall, TEACH-NOW utilized a curriculum rooted in the InTASC standards – a set of well-known and widely-used standards for new teachers centered on effective instructional practices. Program materials as well as observation and interview data revealed that the InTASC standards were integrated across curriculum and were consistently positioned and referred to as a key indicator of the program's legitimacy. Similar to TEACH-NOW's understanding of accreditation as a marker of legitimacy, its coherent use of the InTASC standards was consistent with a normative conception of institutional legitimacy wherein value is placed on expectations, conventions, and standards set by professional bodies and associations (Scott, 2014).

The comments of an instructor illustrated the TEACH-NOW's alignment with the specific concepts emphasized within the standards:

> We use the InTASC standards to really guide us … and it really focuses on what I think to be the main components of teaching, which is the instructional cycle: assessment, planning, instruction, as well as the professional pieces too. So, we go through that, and we weave that into the program. (Interview, Instructor F)

Observation data and program documents reflected that there was a "weaving" of the standards throughout the program. For example, the InTASC standards were cited as central during a new candidate orientation when TEACH-NOW was described by its CEO as "legitimate and the best" (Observation, Orientation). The standards also were mentioned frequently in the candidate handbook (Document, *Catalog and Candidate Handbook*) and were also used to guide the design of the program's clinical rubric (Document, "TEACH-NOW Clinical Rubric").

To further signal its legitimacy, the curricular content of the program also reflected responsiveness to the well-known concern that new teachers are not prepared to manage the learning environment. Specifically, TEACH-NOW's curriculum conformed to a degree with the values (Scott, 2014) underlying the "practice turn" (Reid, 2011) in teacher education – a movement that emerged in the face of mounting claims about the inability of "traditional" models to produce effective teachers because of the perceived gap between theory and practice. Practice-based preparation is grounded in the notion that a clinically-rich curriculum focused on candidates' learning of teaching practice is essential to professional preparation (e.g., Ball & Cohen, 1999; Grossman, 2011; Lampert et al., 2013).

Similar to the proponents of practice-based teacher education, TEACH-NOW leaders conceptualized practice as a core element of preparation and thus worked from what can be described as a *practice-focus* by integrating field and clinical experiences across modules:

> The field experiences and clinical experiences of the TEACH-NOW program are embedded in activities across the modules. Early clinical experiences include classroom observations, interviews of teachers and other school professionals, and practice of teaching skills. These experiences – along with reflections – provide candidates invaluable practical knowledge of content and instructional methods. (Document, *Catalog and Candidate Handbook*, p. 15)

Although many conceptualizations of practice-based teacher education center on practices in particular content areas, TEACH-NOW candidates learned and practiced instructional strategies conceptualized as universally effective. With the support of their instructors, cohort members, and mentors, candidates connected and adapted those strategies to their individual content areas and circumstances. Specifically, TEACH-NOW's program content concentrated on key pedagogies (e.g., planning, assessment, differentiation, classroom management, use of technology) and student-centered approaches. Given that candidates were located around the world and that they completed their clinical experiences in a range of schools (i.e., private, public, charter, rural, urban), the program encouraged them to utilize those key pedagogies in ways that were appropriate for the cultural, socioeconomic, and equity-related needs and issues of their specific communities. It is important to note that all of the candidates and graduates interviewed for the case study viewed the program's practice-focus as beneficial to their teaching and noted the usefulness of the key pedagogies they learned in their current and/or future classrooms.

With its commitment to the inclusion of field experiences and its aim to ensure "acquisition of effective teaching competencies" (Document, "Brief Historical Overview," p. 1), TEACH-NOW reflected an assumption that clinical practice was essential to professional preparation because it readied teacher candidates for the realities of the classroom. Connected to the "learn by doing" philosophy that guided its assessment strategy, TEACH-NOW positioned clinical experience, practical application, and the InTASC standards as essential and legitimate knowledge sources.

Preparation at the intersection of the digital age and COVID-19

In a changing landscape where teacher preparation and higher education at-large are both being relocated from the traditional knowledge centers of universities to new and alternate physical and digital spaces, TEACH-NOW reflects a unique confluence of two emerging phenomena: nGSEs and fully online teacher preparation. The theorized profile above shows that as a fully online nGSE, TEACH-NOW was successful in balancing the institutional goal of becoming a technology-centric "fix" for the field of teacher education with consumer desire for a credible and quality preparation experience. As detailed, the push-pull dynamic between innovation and legitimation was at the center

of how TEACH-NOW conceptualized and enacted teacher preparation for the digital age. The two forces that created that tension offer valuable insight to the larger teacher education community, especially after the swift transition of many institutions to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research suggests that many people have negative perceptions about the capacity of online programs to produce qualified and effective teachers for the face-to-face work of the profession (e.g., Adams, Lee, & Cortese, 2012; Faulk, 2010; Huss, 2007). However, now and into the future, these perceptions seem likely to shift. This means that TEACH-NOW's approach may well be informative to a range of preparation programs working to adapt to the sudden increased reliance on e-learning necessitated by the current health crisis. As a forward-thinking proprietary company, TEACH-NOW leaned into what Garrison (2017) describes as a "connected and evolving knowledge society" (p. 171) and utilized technology to maximize its reach, efficiency, and profitability. TEACH-NOW's approach, therefore, sheds light on particular teacher education pedagogies, program structures, and curricular foci that may be of value for others aiming to modify face-to-face programs to incorporate more opportunities for physical distancing and online learning.

Specifically, teacher preparation programs may be able to learn from TEACH-NOW's streamlined, flexible format and consider ways to increase candidate accessibility by reassessing both program calendars and delivery methods. By moving away from the rigidity of the traditional academic calendar and the limitations of face-to-face structures, programs may more nimbly adjust to pressing public health issues while also increasing their appeal to non-traditional candidates. Along similar lines, programs may also consider how to leverage the safety, popularity, and cost-efficiency of e-learning by incorporating fully online or hybrid courses into their program offerings. Furthermore, programs may draw on TEACH-NOW's use of synchronous virtual classes and collaborative candidate cohorts to foster interaction and community within digital spaces. Finally, given that current and future generations of teachers will have lived with constant technological advancement (Dimock, 2019), preparation programs can also learn from TEACH-NOW's deliberate incorporation of digital tools and learning technologies. Further underscored by the widespread utilization of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, TEACH-NOW's technology-centric approach helps to reveal the importance of recognizing, maximizing, and nurturing teacher candidates' technological knowledge and skills while also readying them for the dynamic nature of teaching and learning today.

Nonetheless, it is important to point out that even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, TEACH-NOW's popularity was seen as illuminating – and problematic – for some of those committed to more "traditional" approaches. As Baltodano (2012) suggests, competition from for-profit and online providers has strained university-based schools of education for some time, forcing them

to prove their quality more than ever. According to Baltodano, "[S]chools of education are seeking accreditation at higher rates to become more marketable because what sells well is the promise of accountability and excellence (p. 499)." Yet, TEACH-NOW also understood the selling point of "accountability and excellence." Therefore, its position as a convenient, low-cost, and *accredited* online nGSE pushes back against the common preconception that university-based preparation is implicitly the most legitimate pathway into the profession (Fischetti, 2013).

Thus, while part of what made TEACH-NOW appealing was its affordability and online format, another aspect of what made it attractive is that it worked very deliberately to prove its credibility. Along these lines, it achieved two forms of accreditation – institutional and programmatic – both markers of legitimacy that are important to preparation consumers. Therefore, as teacher education programs innovate and adapt to the needs of candidates entering the profession at the intersection of the digital age and the COVID-19 pandemic, the institutional context, program structure, and curricular content created at TEACH-NOW suggest the importance of striking a balance when it comes to innovation and legitimation. If TEACH-NOW is any indicator, it suggests that in teacher preparation – no matter the format or approach – convenience and cost cannot override credibility.

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