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Learning about Teaching: Redesigning Teacher Preparation

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Abstract

Our country has not yet tackled the question, how do we best prepare teachers. Maybe because the question should be; how do we best support our candidates to learn about teaching in order for them to develop into highly qualified and effective teachers? The answer seems to lie in strategic partnerships between universities and school districts, the quality and length of clinical experiences, and state policies for teacher preparation. Reformers call for a shift towards more clinically based programs that integrate academic content and professional knowledge and skills. Some models that show promise are those that have tried to emulate the residency experience used in teaching hospitals for medical students.

Preparing teachers is a hot topic. Even President Obama included the topic in his state of the union address January 2011. Teacher preparation is being discussed by legislators, professional teacher preparation organizations, alternative certification organizations, Washington, DC think tanks, foundations, corporations, and even on TV talk shows like *The View* and *Oprah*. Everyone seems to have an opinion, and they should, because educational attainment is at the core of what helps someone succeed. But more importantly, America needs to enlist an army of highly qualified and effective teachers. In 1988, Linda Darling-Hammond stated:

As a country we cannot expect to maintain, or regain, economic and political status in the world while allowing our human capital to fall out however it may. We're in a situation where we simply cannot allow children to fail (p. 12).

But we are. Research has indicated that our children rank low compared to other nations due to the inequality of our schools, especially in our inability to have a highly qualified, effective teacher in every classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2009).

The Conundrum of Learning about Teaching

In October 2009, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan spoke at Columbia's Teachers College. His topic focused on the need for reforming teacher preparation programs. He challenged all colleges of education to dramatically change how they prepare teachers for the 21st Century. He urged us to focus our mission on student achievement so that our candidates would be ready to prepare future students for success in a global economy. Specifically, he said, "America's great educational challenges require that this new generation of well-prepared teachers significantly boost student learning and increase college-readiness". America used to rank among the highest educational countries and is slipping every year.

One only need look on the web to find the many groups that claim a reform needs to take place in teacher preparation. Many of these groups have connections with the different pathways to teacher certification and are not representative of the traditional programs in colleges and universities. Some of these organizations share members on boards, share the same ideals, and collaborate on research studies.

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The striking difference of these various groups from the academic teacher training institutions is their lack of connectedness to the Specialized Professional Associations (SPA) that have worked for years on defining professional teaching standards used to guide teacher preparation in specific subject matters, specific developmental levels, pedagogical content knowledge, and special needs or the preparation of other school professionals.

When I started teaching in the early 1970s, there was only one way to become a teacher. Attend a college or university, obtain a bachelor's degree in education from a traditional institution, and, maybe, return to a university to obtain a master's degree. However, that is not the playing field in the 21st century. In the United States, it has always been the role of the state to determine how a teacher can be certified and licensed. In the 1980s, states and other policy writers saw on the horizon a teacher shortage. In order to fill those upcoming needs, states opened the door to accept alternative routes that have resulted in approximately 130 pathways to becoming a teacher (National Research Council, 2010). To add to the conundrum, there are currently numerous online, for-profit institutions that are not accredited by the two organizations that are recognized for teacher education, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) or Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC). Yet, the for-profits are granting degrees in education, and their graduates are being accepted into the teaching workforce. In other words, there is an unequal proliferation of ways into the teaching profession that is accepted by all 50 states (Cochran-Smith & Power, 2010).

There are leaders in the alternative certification movement whom are educated, smart, and are questioning the traditional path to becoming a teacher. Few have

degrees in education. They are finding support from numerous states, foundations, corporations, Washington, DC think tanks, and legislators who believe that there are huge flaws in the preparation of teachers by traditional higher education. They have the attention of the media and TV personalities. They are raising millions of dollars to support their efforts, and they are succeeding. The organization, National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), whose style of research is questionable in the academic world, is making a lot of noise and gaining a lot of attention. Those of us from NCATE accredited institutions know that our programs are evaluated through a rigorous accreditation process. Yet, this rigorous accreditation process is dismissed by NCTQ and their proponents.

Currently, NCTQ is working with US News and World Report to conduct a review that will evaluate the nation's teacher preparation programs. This review is being reported in every venue of the media with the underlying assumption that the review is unique. One of the methods they will use is to examine course syllabi in order to deduce what exactly is being taught to prospective teachers. This outdated method was the process used by SPAs to examine specific programs prior to 2000. However, this review process ended because the professional education community recognized that performance assessments of our candidates would be a far better indicator of what our candidates know and the skills they can accomplish. Rather than focusing on the inputs of knowledge, we turned to focus on the outputs our candidates can perform. As a result, for the past decade we have been forging new forms of authentic assessments that are based on the performance of our candidates and we have data to assist in continuous improvement. Within this trend we have also fostered in our candidates the importance of becoming

reflective researchers in their own schools and in their own classrooms.

A Shortage of Qualified and Effective Teachers

Arne Duncan's (2009) speech might have well stirred up some of us. However, with some of his comments, he was right on target. Throughout his remarks, there are statements that need to be addressed and acted upon by those of us in the higher education community. For instance, he stated, "The challenge to our schools is not a looming teacher shortage but rather a shortage of great teachers in schools and communities where they are needed most." In reality, the concern includes even more. Teacher educators need to acknowledge there is a shortage of teachers that can effectively teach the diverse students they see in their classrooms on a daily basis. The challenge is for *all* teachers to be effective with special needs children and English language learners not just those teachers that are specialized in those areas (Cochran-Smith & Power, 2010).

What Duncan (2009) really needed to address is the teacher-quality gap. We often hear about the poorest schools with the largest minority students having the most under qualified teachers, out-of-field teachers, the most teachers with alternative certifications, and in some cases, the most teachers with emergency certifications. These are the schools we need to better assist. Those of us in traditional teacher preparation assist with a band-aid approach by placing our practicum students or interns in these schools for a few weeks or even a semester. These are the same schools in which critics of teacher preparation and champions of alternative certification place their candidates. Those in some alternative certification programs have content knowledge because they hold a bachelor's degree or higher in the areas in which they

are teaching, but most are not effective teachers when they are learning pedagogical skills at the same time they first step into a classroom.

For years, our country has had a shortage of qualified math and science teachers. Being "qualified" means that a teacher knows the content they are teaching and uses the pedagogical content of their discipline. In the area of math, many lack the level of pedagogical preparation in mathematics to teach the content. But more importantly, there are a "high number of teachers in middle and high school mathematics courses who are teaching out-of-field" (National Research Council, 2010, p. 124). Information on qualified science teachers is a decade old, but it, too, shows that many teaching science are also out-of-field (National Research Council, 2010, p. 146). This lack of qualified teachers has an enormous impact on our nation because, if teachers are not qualified, they cannot be effective. As a result, a domino effect is created that enlarges as it moves to the student population. Research (Darling-Hammond, 2000) supports the following:

- The percentage of teachers with full certification and a major in the field in which they teach is a more powerful predictor of student achievement than the educational attainment or level of the teacher.
- Following accreditation standards is related to teacher qualifications in the field.
- Changes in course taking, curriculum content, testing, or textbooks make little difference if teachers do not know how to use these tools to diagnose their students' learning needs.
- States impact the qualifications of the teachers through policies that influence the hiring standards of school districts.

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Research has identified that the single most important determining factor in a child's educational experience is the classroom teacher. When looking for a qualified teacher, a highly qualified teacher, or an effective teacher, what needs to be examined is the pathway by which they gained entry into the teaching workforce. Success really boils down to the rigor of the state certification and licensing standards.

Redesign Models

For decades there has been a call to reform teacher education. In fact, it has been said that teacher education needs a "dramatic overhaul" (The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010). Most redesigns center on better partnerships between public schools and higher education that include more hands-on experiences for candidates. Working together to develop more robust clinical experiences provides opportunities for candidates to integrate theory, content, and pedagogy with practical knowledge. Partnerships also assist in professional development of the classroom teacher that, in turn, impacts student learning. It is a win-win situation.

A model of redesign that is supported by the Holmes Group and NCATE, is the Professional Development School (PDS). This model is built on the foundation of the laboratory school that grew out of the Normal School movement. A PDS experience centers on student learning. Novice teachers work under the guidance of an experienced teacher. The partnership brings public school teachers and university professors together to develop and share a conception of good teaching. This allows for the classroom teacher to gain professional development at the same time the pre-service candidate is gaining practical experience. Additionally,

the novice teacher learns about working within a school community by working on school teams that are developing curriculum, examining new textbooks, or being engaged in action research (Darling-Hammond, 2005).

Some have called for teaching preparation to be redesigned based on the training received at medical colleges. Grady (1991) compared the training of both medical and educational professionals and found that there were similarities at the basic level. There were also vast differences after the first year. Both start with didactic instruction in their field of study and gain exposure to their professions through some type of early field experience. The main difference is the medical student has field experiences much earlier that require them to bridge theory with practice.

A redesign that somewhat follows the medical model has taken hold in urban areas. Berry, Montgomery, and Snyder (2008) investigated the Urban Teacher Residency (UTR) and found it to be a model that "incorporated the "best of both traditional and alternative approaches to teacher education" (p.1). UTR is a response to the need to recruit teachers for high need urban schools and is an example of how K-12 schools work collaboratively with institutions of higher education to develop year-long residency programs. Some successful programs include: Chicago's Academy for Urban School Leadership (AUSL), Boston Teacher Residency (BTR), and Bank Street College with Partnership and High-Needs NYC Schools. UTR is similar to traditional Master of Teaching (MAT) programs in that candidates already have a bachelor's degree or they, perhaps, are a professional wishing to switch careers with a desire to go into teaching. However, that is where the similarities end. Selection into UTR is more rigorous, and recruitment is based on the

needs of a particular district. Residents are compensated for working in their schools, and they must agree to teach for three years once their residencies are complete as well as participate in a professional induction program sponsored by the school district once they are hired.

There are two strengths to the UTR experience. The first is the year-long internship, or residency, under the supervision and guidance of a well trained and compensated master teacher. Mentor teachers at first collaborate with the resident to plan and teach lessons allowing for guided pedagogical training to take place on a daily basis. As residents grow and mature in their teaching, so do their teaching and classroom responsibilities.

The second strength to UTR is simple. At the same time residents are learning how to teach, they are learning about teaching. Residents complete graduate courses at an institution of higher education that enables them to make connections between theory and practice. Districts that are working with higher education in UTR models are also finding that they have a direct line that channels recruits into an urban district (Darling-Hammond, 2009).

The striking difference Grady (1991) uncovered when comparing the internship of the medical student with that of the teacher candidate is the professional environment. The medical student is trained to focus on the problems of the individual patient. They work with a variety of mentors who provide advice on individual patients on a daily basis. It is through collegial interactions within the professional community that the medical student is inducted into the profession from the beginning. In the exchange of information, the medical students learn that there are many ways to solve problems and that the discussion of cases is the norm. This dialogue engages

the medical student to focus on the need of the patient with the support of a community of professionals.

In contrast, during student teaching, the teacher candidate is assigned to one classroom with one mentor, which is a limiting situation. Teacher candidates only experience the methods used by one professional and receive feedback on their teaching from only one practitioner. The community of professionals is not inclined to induct the student teacher into the profession until they are hired in their first position. Hence, the medical student receives much more on-the-job team mentoring with a focus on problem solving than the teacher candidate. Sadly, student teachers are often left alone to figure it out for themselves.

Turning Teacher Preparation Upside Down

A year later, in November 2010, Arne Duncan was more optimistic about teacher preparation and redesign due to a study commissioned by NCATE. This report entitled *Transforming Teacher Education Through Clinical Practice: A National Strategy to Prepare Effective Teachers* (2010) was the focus of The Blue Ribbon Panel on Clinical Preparation and Partnerships for Improved Student Learning. The panel was composed of a diverse group comprised of state officials, P-12 and higher education leaders, teachers, teacher educators, union representatives, and critics of teacher education. For ten months, they examined the gap between how teachers are prepared and what schools need.

The NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel (2010) states, “The education of teachers in the United State needs to be turned upside down” (p. ii). They, too, see teacher education programs emulating the model used in medical education. Thus, the panel calls for a paradigm shift away from

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programs emphasizing academic preparation with lots of theory, lessons, and unit plans which seldom link with field-based experiences. The report calls for “sweeping changes in how we deliver, monitor, evaluate, oversee, and staff clinically based preparation to nurture a whole new form of teacher education” (p. iii). Ten design principles and a comprehensive series of strategies, if adopted by the higher education community, may revolutionize teacher education. The principles outlined by the NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel (2010) are:

1. The focus is on student learning;
2. Clinical preparation is integrated throughout every facet of teacher education;
3. A candidate’s progress and the elements of preparation program are continuously judged on the basis of data;
4. Programs prepare teachers who are expert in content and how to teach it and are also innovators, collaborators, and problem solvers;
5. Candidates learn in an interactive professional community;
6. Clinical educators and coaches are rigorously selected and prepared and drawn from both higher education and the P-12 sector;
7. Specific sites are designed and funded to support embedded clinical preparation;
8. Technology applications foster high impact preparation;
9. A powerful research and development agenda and systematic gathering and use of data supports continuous improvement in teacher preparation; and

10. Strategic partnerships are imperative for powerful clinical preparation (pp. 5-6).

If we are to turn teacher preparation upside down, what will that mean? How will it impact our candidates and their learning? How will it impact faculty and their teaching? How will it impact children? It is evident that the programs that are having the most impact are those that extended student teaching to a full year. Thus, it is fairly evident that robust clinical experiences that lead to teaching residencies lay on the horizon. As is the case of the UTR model, the residency will provide “an important vehicle for the nation to begin working on the critical problem of teaching quality for our most underserved students” (Darling-Hammond, 2009, p. 11). Faculty development needs to be part of the redesign to make certain that candidates are trained in quality schools by effective teachers. Instead of being placed by themselves in classrooms, can candidates be placed in groups of three to four in order to focus on individual needs of children? Can we place them with a team of teachers that will create a rotation schedule so they can experience the techniques and skills of a variety of professionals and, at the same time, be mentored by a collegial team of professionals similar to a medical school model?

How do we change the assessment of our candidates to reflect that they can successfully teach all children? Candidates must be able to meet the needs of those that are gifted, average, have special needs, and are English language learners. Candidates will need to collect evidence including student outcome data, student artifacts, summative and formative assessments, and videotapes with critiques of themselves teaching and co-teaching.

If we redesign teacher preparation to model the medical profession, how can we

transform schools to be the environment of a teaching hospital? How do we bring the scholarship of teaching into the daily practice of the classroom? Of course we cannot do it alone. The need to form new strategic partnerships to share in the preparation of this new teacher workforce is crucial. The NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel (2010) calls for clinically based preparation that supports laboratory experiences which bring theory, subject matter, and pedagogy together in an integrated structure so all students learn. The teacher resident learns to reflect on the problems they encounter and develop the knowledge base and pedagogical content of a professional educator. In order for this to work, there must be the “commitment and support of the full compliment of stakeholders who need to be involved” (p. 8). The partnerships that will need to be forged will allow teacher educators to be more engaged with learning about teaching and how to be a highly qualified and effective educator. The NCATE Blue Ribbon Panel (2010) states:

Students, the primary focus, can then benefit from the functioning learning communities formed to support teacher learning and from the additional human resources that can be focused on their needs. Together, these partners can shift a program’s emphasis from learning about teaching to using knowledge to develop practice that effectively addresses students’ needs (p. 9).

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