

Emergency certification of special education teachers:



Many paths to the same goal?

A dialogue with
Dr. Richard Riedl and Dr. Stephen Bronack



Special education teachers are in short supply, but how to fill the need quickly while assuring adequate preparation? In a departure from our usual format, research specialist Dr. Richard Riedl calls upon his colleague Dr. Stephen Bronack to discuss controversial shortcuts to certification. Their dialogue is fitting, as each came to the teaching profession by a different route. We hope their conversation will continue in future issues, and we welcome our readers to join in!

DICK [stepping out of author mode into Chat mode]: Hi, everybody. This is Dick Riedl, more frequently referred to as Dr. Richard Riedl. I want to step out of the author role a moment to introduce you to my colleague, Steve...er, that is, Dr. Stephen Bronack.

Steve is a member of the faculty at Appalachian State and teaches in the same program I do. We were talking the other day, and he expressed a desire to find an alternative to publishing in the academic environment, so I shared with him my experience writing for *The Catalyst* (ed. note: *a far cry from academia!*) He thought the chance to do that might be good for him so we decided to tackle something together. And this seemed like a natural place to try it.

Steve went through a traditional teacher education program to become an English teacher. He then went to a program that is a bit different to get his masters' degree in Instructional Technology and then on to get his doctorate. He has taught at Lehigh University and is now at Appalachian with us.

I, on the other hand, took a non-traditional route to teaching. I enrolled in the Teacher Corps after graduating from college. I got my masters' degree through that program. So, you can see, we have two very different types of experiences upon which to call, plus our time spent working in teacher education programs, to explore some of these issues.

Steve, why don't you say a word or two before we slide back into the author thing.

STEVE: Thanks, Dick. Hi, folks. Having the opportunity to share time, thoughts, and experiences with each of you about issues that are important—like this one—is very exciting for me. Dick has been such a wonderful influence on my thinking about teaching, learning, and working with students of all needs and abilities. I'm sure he has been as thought-provoking with you as he has been with me. Hopefully, together through this piece, we can continue to contribute to these important conversations. So, thanks for having me! Now, on with the show ...

In a recent opinion piece in the *Baltimore Sun* (Rosenberg, 2005) Michael Rosenberg, a professor in the department of special education at the Johns Hopkins University, raises questions of the quality of alternative route to certification (ARC) programs to meet critical shortages of special education teachers (p. 2). He wisely raises cautions about programs that are too short in duration or that don't have the quality of experience and support that will help newcomers to the profession of teaching and to the very demanding focus of special education. The last thing special needs children, or any chil-

dren, need is a warm body rushed into the classroom without the skills and knowledge necessary to create the type of learning environment they deserve.

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The flip side of this, of course, is that bringing people into the field who do not follow the normal path to the classroom can bring a different way of seeing things that might be valuable. And, while the call to looking carefully at

fast track programs is important, we should not just assume that any program that lasts longer or follows the traditional teacher training pattern is automatically good.

With that in mind we are going to wrestle with some of the issues and questions that come from taking a hard and honest look at teacher preparation.

The error most commonly made when assessing a different way to do something is to assume that the way it has been done is the standard by which we should measure the new. While that is often a good way to do it if you are sure that what has been done is as good as can be done, such is rarely the case.

For example, the first instinct for assessing the validity of courses offered via the Internet as opposed to being taught face-to-face in a classroom is to give the online students the same test they would get in the classroom to see if they measure up in the same way. The assumption then is that if the online students do as well on the test as those who took the class in the traditional format that the online course must be good. But what if the traditional course is not very well taught or not well conceived so that students really learn? All that has been done is to settle for that mediocrity.

So, any effort to assess a new way of preparing teachers should be done with an eye toward what we know about good teachers and how they got to be good teachers and not just a simple measure against the way teachers have traditionally been prepared.

Dick entered the teaching profession via a national program called Teacher Corps. It was a program that was an attempt to respond to a need for teachers, particularly in low income rural and urban areas. At the same time he was going through this program, and in his first years in the classroom, he taught in schools that were staffed by teachers from The Teachers' College at Columbia University (at the time and still one of the prestigious teacher education programs in the country), as well as several solid, but not nearly as famous, teacher education institutions in the region, and several teachers who were part of a short term preparation program that spent a few weeks in the summer trying to prepare them for the classroom. Can we draw any conclusions from his experience?

Well, the Columbia grads split. One lasted about two weeks and the other struggled to stay in the classroom.¹

1) These were inner city schools and were tough places to teach, so struggling was a norm rather than an exception.

2) If you are wondering about Dick, he taught for 4 years in these schools before getting completely frustrated with the status quo. He left to seek leverage, a degree in this case, that would allow him to help bring about change.

The graduates from the regional institutions also came and went, though most lasted at least one year.

Of those in the quick prep programs, most didn't last beyond the first year and were often at a loss for something constructive to do, but one turned into a fantastic teacher who made a huge difference in the lives of his students.²

Steve took a more traditional route—with typical results. His first experience interacting with students of his "own" was student teaching. As in most traditional programs, this meant 10-15 weeks, under the watchful guidance of a practicing teacher, gradually assuming more responsibility for an actual classroom full of students. In

almost every traditional teacher preparation program, student teaching is a capstone experience—the last requirement one fulfills after years of coursework with professors of education and content-area and among a crop of peers with little to no

teaching experience, as well.

During their short tenure as practicing teachers, student teachers are embedded within the school cultures in which they are placed. That's a good thing. But they are also isolated from each other and from the academic culture on which they have relied for the past 3 or more years. That's a bad thing. Most teacher preparation programs try to balance these by placing groups of student teachers in the same schools and also by appointing student teacher supervisors—faculty who go from classroom to classroom and observe student teachers as they teach. Steve was lucky to have an excellent set of mentor teachers and an active, supportive supervisor. He even had a fellow student teacher just next door. Still, one 45-minute visit per month does little when a new teacher is struggling to make sense of grading, discipline, collegiality, and what it means to be a professional. Within two years, both Steve and his fellow newbie teacher had left the K-12 classroom.

It is clear that what it takes to prepare a successful teacher is both complex and difficult to measure. However, we suspect there are three critical attributes for successfully preparing teachers: environment, expectation, and effect.

Critical attributes for successful teacher preparation

- Environment matters, but what kinds of environments

work? Exciting new research in neurogenesis suggests that boring, sterile, stressful environments stunt the brain's ability to regenerate itself; whereas, active, engaging, supportive environments stimulate it. In much the same way, the environments in which we prepare teachers can have a significant effect on the likelihood that those teachers will be successful once they have been certified. Environments that encourage sharing, collegiality, connectedness, and purpose are far more likely to support effective teacher development than those that rely on isolation, mechanical routines, and staid practice. If teachers are prepared in more constructive environments, perhaps we can expect them to teach in more constructive ways.

- Expectations set the stage for what behaviors developing teachers are likely to exhibit, but what expectations are reasonable? For instance, does the length of time one spends preparing to teach affect the ability of that teacher-to-be to teach well? Many would agree with Rosenberg that too little time spent in preparation before entering a classroom is a warning sign. But others would not, noting that high-stress jobs where effective judgment is based on rapid decision-making are best prepared for by placing candidates directly in those kinds of situations—early and often. Expectations for new teachers come in all shapes and sizes, from multiple stakeholders, and often conflict and compete for attention and importance. Ultimately, only those teachers who can identify and who readily accept the implicit and explicit expectations of teaching will be successful—regardless of the route to certification.

- Effect: Teachers matter because they make a difference—but how do we know when a teacher is “good”? That is, what are the measurable effects of teachers who are well-prepared versus those who are not? Length of time in preparation and amount of supervision are offered as important indicators of quality, but are these really critical measures of the effect of preparation, or are they simply the easiest indicators for us to quantify? Perhaps cost and retention really are the best indicators of success. Then again, perhaps not. Seems to us there are other characteristics of teaching and learning that differentiate a well-prepared teacher from one who is...well, less so. If the impact of underprepared teachers is evident and cumulative, particularly for those considered “at risk,” perhaps we are researching the wrong things. Effective teachers have more to offer than simply being cheap and long-of-tooth.

Special education teachers are among those who experience the most stress in their teaching lives. They have difficult decisions to make and must work effectively within a very diverse community (regular classroom teachers, administrators, parents and various other specialists) and with children who are among the most challenging to teach. What do we know about how our most effective teachers have gotten to be that way? What do we know about the role longevity plays in the development of good teachers?

In an online discussion board for one of our classes, and without prompting, a thread developed regarding the preparation of teachers. Here is one entry from a veteran classroom teacher that captures the tone.

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My experiences with student teachers would suggest that more time is spent learning about education. It is impossible to learn how to teach without teaching. I really wish those seeking a teaching degree could spend more time in schools. Again, time becomes an issue. My interns and student teachers always say they learn so much more being in the classroom than in college classes. It is difficult to have a balance.

This might suggest that a traditional program is not the best route to go. But what are our alternatives? How do we make the kinds of decisions that need to be made so that we are sure all of our teachers are as well prepared for the challenges of the profession as they can be?

We will try to address some of these questions in the following issue of *The Catalyst*. We may not have any answers but sometimes it is not the answers that are important but finding the right questions.

References

Rosenberg, M. S. (2005, December 22). *Getting best results from new teachers*. Baltimore Sun. Retrieved January 30, 2006 from <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/opinion/oped/bal-op-education22dec22,1,7570227.story>

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