

Tomorrow's Teachers in Yesterday's Schools: How Can We Prepare?

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In the last issue of The Catalyst Steve and I explored issues surrounding the process of preparing teachers for the classroom, including the special education classroom. We recognized that there are many routes to becoming a teacher and that time in the classroom is perceived to be one of the most important elements of teacher preparation. But how much time is necessary? And what types of environments, completing what kinds of tasks, are the most effective and efficient for preparing new teachers? How do we find the right questions to ask?

It may be that the most important questions have less to do directly with the preparation of teachers and more to do with the kinds of schools we want. What kinds of experiences do we want our children to have and what do we hope our children will take away from those experiences? If we value what our schools are doing now, the types of experiences our children are having today and what they are taking away from those experiences then the best preparation of would-be teachers certainly would include spending a lot of time in our schools learning the ways that the schools run and the ways that teachers do their job in those schools. The role of teacher education institutions would be to reinforce the skills, attitudes, and actions that are found in teachers who are most successful in our school settings.

But what if there are aspects of teaching today that we want to change? That is, what if we expect a well-prepared teacher of today to be able to help people learn in environments other than the classroom, and to use tools and techniques generally unavailable in traditional environments for "teaching"? Therein lies one of the real interesting questions with which teacher educators have been wrestling for decades: does simply spending time in the classrooms of today add any value to the preparation of the teachers of tomorrow? Teachers have to work in schools as they are. But teacher educators (and others) often expect new teachers to be equipped to work in schools as they would like them to be. Often, this creates a troubling disconnect between what the teacher candidate has been prepared to do and the demands of the actual job.

And let's not forget the new teachers, themselves. Would-be teachers also have images of what the world of learning should be, and what role(s) good teachers play in shaping it. That's why they are becoming teachers, after all. Each comes to teaching with individual, compelling reasons for "becoming a teacher." Sometimes, their images of teaching are fashioned by their experiences as students. Other times, their images are based on personal experiences that have little to do with classrooms and schools. There are countless characteristics and beliefs that all teachers and would-be teachers likely share. But with as many different reasons for becoming a teacher as there are people preparing to be one, it is hard to imagine that any one aspect of teacher preparation is universally requisite and uniformly effective -- including spending time in classrooms in schools.

Add to all of this complexity the rules and regulations applied by state agencies and national accreditation organizations and you have a very interesting mix of often contradictory forces attempting to inform teacher education institutions on how they should conduct their business. These rules and regulations provide guidelines for what teacher preparation should look like, and establish the parameters within which teacher education programs may work. They provide a structure and direction for teacher preparation programs and for the state licensure agencies that recognize and certify the graduates of these programs. As such, they play an important role in shaping how teacher preparation programs deal with important issues, such as: should teachers be prepared to teach in schools as they currently function? Should teachers be prepared to follow the latest theories on learning and education? Should teacher education programs be regulated by rigorous standards that cause programs to be very much alike?

These are just some of the questions that need to be addressed when considering any issues raised about emergency licensure programs, the amount of time spent in a school vs. in a college classroom or any of the other questions surrounding teacher education.

But let's consider first the question of whether teacher education should prepare teachers for schools as the currently operate or for some vision of how they should operate. For better or worse, one of the most dedicated, hard working groups of people that we know of currently come under a great deal of blame for the perceived ills of education. It is distinctly possible that they are simply the easy targets and not at all at fault. After all, the image our schools operate in was first developed at a time when our society was making the transition between being an agricultural society into being an industrial society. In essence, we have schools that run on an agricultural calendar, but which operate on an assembly line model, trying to prepare children to live in a post-industrial world. It is an interesting mix, and creates a difficult professional environment in which to work.

But recognizing an obvious contradiction is a far cry from the ability to realign teachers' and students' experiences, accordingly. Strong forces are brought to bear on issues of schooling, which both challenge the status quo and also to maintain it. There has always been a tension between teacher preparation institutions and the public schools for which those institutions prepare teachers. Or perhaps more accurately, there has been a tension between the graduates of teacher education programs and the programs from which they graduate. That is because we use this language: "we prepare people to be teachers." Yet most teachers find that they are not really prepared for the realities of the classrooms they enter. And for that, they often blame the programs that "prepared" them.

There are several reasons for this disconnect between the graduates of teacher education programs and the programs they completed. Among them is the disconnect between the preparation of professionals, and the professionalism of the work for which they are prepared. For whatever reasons, the teaching profession is not entered through an extended combination of internship and residency as are the medical professions. This is the case in almost all teacher education programs despite plenty of evidence that it takes most teachers between three to five years of experience in the classroom before they

begin to feel fully comfortable in the role. So in truth, most teacher education programs prepare their graduates to begin learning how to be successful apprentices in the classroom rather than actually preparing each to hit the classroom floor running as successful teachers.

So, it would seem that a simple solution would be to create programs that require more time in the classroom prior to becoming fully licensed teachers. But remember, professions that have programs that require that type of long term, low pay experience lead to high pay professions. Can we expect teachers to spend three years in an internship experience that leads to a job paying only \$29,000 a year?

Another reason for this disconnect is that sometimes teacher education programs are not preparing teachers for the way schools are but the way they should be. Many teacher education programs function very differently than the schools for which they prepare their graduates, because they are based on a different set of theories and beliefs about teaching and learning, overall. For example, faculty in teacher education programs are housed in colleges and universities and are obligated to be on top of their field; to be aware of the latest theories and research and even to conduct their own research. They, of course, wish their students to be aware of the latest theories and research and help them apply that knowledge to their classroom. However, those theories and practices often run into some harsh and contradictory realities in the classroom. They may just be bad theories or bad practices that won't stand the test of time. Or they may run into established educators who choose not to consider new theories and practices. Or they may not thrive in established school systems that lack the agility to adapt and to support new standards, theories or practices. Regardless, one result is that many new teachers enter classroom environments armed with high ideals and future-oriented skill sets, and find a different reality than the one for which they were prepared. This different reality in most classrooms is braced also by high ideals and sophisticated techniques. They are just different from the ideals and techniques taught in many colleges and universities.

Let's take a look at a specific example. In special education we are seeing the emergence of inclusion for all but those individuals for whom it is clear inclusion won't work as a standard practice. This may not be the best thing for many students but it is becoming more and more prevalent as parents espouse inclusion for their children and as many special education teacher preparation programs emphasize that aspect of IDEA. But what does the new teacher who has been taught that inclusion is the desired practice do when she enters a school in which inclusion is seen in a different way, seeking the least restrictive environment not starting from the assumption that inclusion is the starting place? Spending more time in a highly-inclusive classroom would not make this new teacher better-prepared for the challenges of the more restricted approach. In fact, better preparation may include less time in the same kinds of classrooms and more time exploring different theories, beliefs, and practices regarding inclusion through realistic and accessible means, such as case studies, interviews, and online discussions with in-service special educators.

Ultimately, the question of how much time in a classroom is "enough" for new teachers boils down to a clear--yet flexible--understanding of the kinds of experiences that best help teachers provide the most effective environments for all students to learn. Practices and environments that are reliable and valid, and that are likely to remain so as our charge as educators continues to evolve, should be transferred from one generation of educators to the next. The best way to do this is to work together, side-by-side, in the most realistic yet safe environments possible.

The role of teacher education programs is to help prepare teachers to be successful in both school and non-school settings, so inclusion of multiple, immersive experiences makes sense.

But truly effective teacher preparation programs also challenge new and experienced educators to consider what "might be" in the world of teaching and learning. Often, the creativity and reflection that non-classroom activities engender are just as important to the development of effective teachers as the hands-on, in-the-trenches ones we rely upon so readily. Sometimes, simply spending time in the classrooms of today adds little value to the preparation of the teachers of tomorrow. Finding the right balance between hands-on and reflective preparation is the key to be equipping new teachers to work in schools both as they are and as we would like them to be.