

An Analysis of Teacher Preparation Programs

and Teacher Attrition

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Introduction

Questions have been raised by educators about the attributes necessary to make teacher preparation programs successful in the preparation of teachers for the classroom. It is an important conversation in light of the high attrition rate for teachers. The essential question revolves around the effort to make preparation stem the efflux of teachers from the profession.

Using information obtained from educational theorists and various studies, this response will address the following factors:

- What do Beginning Teachers Need to Be Successful in the Classroom?
- How preparation intersects with retention
- Alternate routes toward certification
- Teacher preparation programs and the current policy environment

What do Beginning Teachers Need to Be Successful in the Classroom?

According to **Bransford & Darling Hammond**, to make good educational decisions, teachers must be knowledgeable of the multiple ways in which students'

learning takes place in the context of development, learning differences, language and cultural influences, individual temperaments, interests and approaches to learning. In addition to foundational knowledge in these areas of learning, teachers need to be able to gather information that will prepare them to make grounded judgments about what students need and then select the needed strategies to solve any educational challenge. They must be able to determine what is best for each child and keep it at the center of each academic decision.

Since the abilities of the teacher are increasingly seen as a crucial component of student success (**Ferguson, Sanders, Horn**), the demands on teachers continue to expand. These researchers point to the fact that content knowledge, pedagogy and pedagogical content knowledge are the bare minimum required of teachers. Teachers must now be prepared to manage classroom activities, behavior and discipline with the added complexity of doing it in ever-diversifying classrooms (**Banks, Gay, Kozol**). Not only are teachers charged with the task of preparing for and understanding multicultural students, but also with the policies related to inclusion, teachers must deal with students with varying degrees of emotional problems.

There are multiple sets of skills required for a teacher to be successful in today's classroom. In addition to classroom management, there are varied skills related to content and pedagogical requirements. There are large differences between the needed skills of elementary, middle and high school teachers. The obvious differences are related to developmental stages and behavioral differences. Elementary classes are all contained (except for pull outs for remediation, ELL, etc.) and so elementary teachers are required to develop pedagogical content and content knowledge in all subjects. Elementary

teachers experience some of the greatest range in student development over a year. This student development must be accounted for and considered when developing academic plans. These are just a few of the considerations that elementary teachers need to be prepared to be successful.

The preparation of middle and high school teachers present many of the same challenges such as preparing for an ever-diversifying population. There are some other unique challenges such as preparing for their particular subjects. Each subject has a set of best practices as identified by education professionals.

General Best Practices

Bransford and Darling Hammond state that teachers should know; 1) how the subject matter is defined, 2) what the purposes are for teaching the subject matter 3) what does understanding look like, sound like, etc., 4) what curricula are available to guide teaching, 5) how to assess student understanding, 6) what practices characterize the teaching of the subject matter.

In addition to knowing all that, teachers have to understand how students learn during the periods of development surrounding their grade level. They need to appreciate how the cultural background of students may affect their learning or demonstration thereof. Not only do teachers need to know what curricula are available to them, they need to be able to critically evaluate different curricula and know how to use them. Teachers need to be able to glean a sense of what students already know and what they have learned through instruction.

Social Studies

Daniels and Bizar (2005) state that "social studies is a natural home for authentic school experiences." This means that teachers should develop social science experiences around the real issues that people face in the world, helping to immediately connect students to the importance of what they are learning.

Science

According to **Bransford & Darling Hammond**, best practices in teaching science should include lots of inquiry. Inquiry in turn will lead to hands-on exploration and group discussion. Students should be allowed to discover the answers, indeed the content, on their own. Subject matter discovery happens as a way of teaching critical thinking and habits of mind.

Mathematics

Teachers need to understand how to make connections with mathematics and outside mathematics if they are to come to grips with mathematical ideas (**National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2000**). **Ball**, one of the most prominent researchers in mathematics states that traditional school mathematics content is not difficult, that pre-college education provides teachers with much of what they need to know about mathematics, and that majoring in mathematics ensures subject matter knowledge. These ideas support current teacher education practices as well as proposals to reform the preparation of teachers.

Reading/Language Arts

According to **Bransford & Darling Hammond**, there is an emerging consensus that teaching reading involves both teaching students to decode written texts and to make

meaning from those texts, and recognition that part of teaching reading involves teaching students' comprehension and interpretive strategies, as well as metacognitive strategies for monitoring their comprehension. There is general agreement that students need to learn to write in multiple genres and for multiple audiences. Elementary and secondary teachers alike need opportunities to explore how, and in what ways, grammar instruction supports students in learning to read and write, and how the strategies for instruction might differ depending upon a student's English language proficiency.

How Teacher Preparation Intersects with Teacher Attrition

Teacher attrition rates are at an all time high. This is a nation wide problem (**U.S. Department of Education**). This problem is especially prevalent in schools with high percentages of minority students (**Haycock & Peske, Economic Policy Institute**). According to **The National Conference of State Legislatures**, 30% to 50% of teachers leave the profession within 3 to 5 years. Their research indicates that the teachers that decided to quit teaching left because of 3 reasons. Those reasons were:

- lack of administrative support
- student behavior and
- poor school environment.

Their reasons were not related to any of the issues regarding their preparation by schools of education nor alternative education programs.

Traditional as well as alternative certification programs seem to be lacking in the ability to adequately prepare teachers for longevity in the classroom (USDOE). Haycock

and Peske conclude that it is lack of experience in dealing with the responsibilities other than academic that seems to be the problem. Teachers are not prepared adequately to deal with discipline, classroom management, poor climate, inclusion of emotionally challenged, learning disabled students, etc. This is where preparation programs are falling short and perhaps contributing to high attrition rates. More field experience, mentoring and guidance may be included as part of teacher education curricula. Factors related to attrition seem to be on the job-site not in the teacher education classrooms, however, teacher education programs may help stem the tide of attrition by focusing more on job-site issues. Teacher preparation programs focus primarily on pedagogy, methodology, learning and developmental styles and content knowledge. There is little preparation for the realities of working in the public school environment. Even the practicum or field experience is not a realistic exposure to being completely responsible for running a classroom. The guiding teacher is responsible for the interaction with parents, staff and administration. Typically, the teachers selected for mentoring have been trained, have extensive experience and have a proven track record of success. While this may provide a strong model, the student teacher is insulated from all of the true responsibilities of the classroom. The experience may also be in a school radically different than where a first year teacher may find employment. When actually taking ownership of a class of their own, beginning teachers often are overwhelmed by the experience.

Humphrey & Wechsler concluded that of 7 major Alternative Certification programs they had studied, each had successes and failures. Their conclusion was that it was the attributes of the individual schools where the teachers were placed and the attributes of the individual and not the particular certification program that accounted for

the teachers' success. There are so many factors that are difficult to measure that determining if one method of teacher preparation clearly outperforms another is difficult to quantify. The available research seems to indicate that teachers tend to leave the field primarily because of school site conditions.

Alternative Routes Toward Certification

Throughout the United States, alternative routes into the teaching profession are becoming increasingly commonplace. Alternative teacher education programs proliferated in the mid- 1980s, when projected teacher shortages pushed many state education departments and school districts to create ways of placing a certified teacher in every classroom (**Dial & Stevens, 1993; Feistritzer, 1993**). The drive for alternative certification continued to grow during the 1990s. By 2003, 43 states and the District of Columbia had state-run programs, compared with only 8 states in 1983. In addition to those initiatives, colleges and universities have also established alternative teacher preparation programs (**National Center for Alternative Certification, 2004**). In many states, alternative certification now plays a central role in the production of new teachers. **The National Center for Alternative Certification (2004)** estimates that more than 200,000 persons have been licensed through state-sponsored alternative certification programs, with thousands more earning certification through college-sponsored alternative programs. Policymakers have proposed alternative certification as a means to meet the demand for more teachers while still improving teacher quality (**U.S. Department of Education, 2002**). The U.S. Secretary of Education's Third Annual

Report on Teacher Quality (**U.S. Department of Education, 2004**) promotes alternative certification, and the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* considers teachers in alternative certification programs as “highly qualified.”

Alternative certification programs have a very large range of requirements. The entrance requirements usually consist of a minimum GPA score, a minimum score on an entrance exam, interviews, references, another college degree, a minimum number of completed college credits, etc. Some of the pre-service components include a certificate of eligibility from the state or district, a provisional license, minimum hours of pre-service training, field experience, college credits, regular evaluations, etc. In-service requirements can include Masters degree coursework, mentoring, regular evaluations, minimum hours of in-service training, summer school teaching, participation in a certification program at a university, etc.

Researchers generally agree that alternative teacher certification programs are designed to entice persons with various educational, occupational, and life experiences to become teachers (**Feistritzer, 1993, 1998; McKibbin & Ray, 1994; Stoddart, 1993; Wise, 1994**). Alternative certification programs are assumed to help diversify the pool of new teachers by attracting more men, minorities, and mature or experienced individuals. Indeed, some programs appear to recruit mid-career switchers; retired military personnel; people of color; and candidates with subject-matter specialties or strong interest in fields with teacher shortages such as mathematics, science, special education, and bilingual education (**Wilson, Floden, & Ferrini-Mundy, 2001; Zeichner & Shulte, 2001**).

Four and Five Year Programs

An analysis of some of the top teacher education programs such as **Banks Street, University of Wisconsin, Stanford University, Teachers College of Columbia University, Michigan State** and others reveals that each have differing requirements. Some are strictly Masters programs and some are undergraduate through Doctorate. Each has its own requirements for course work and field experience.

Teacher Preparation Programs and the Current Policy Environment

An examination of many school district websites as well as the **U. S. Department of Education** has yielded information about some of the efforts to deal with the teacher attrition rate. They seem to be putting the emphasis on 2 main ways to mitigate this problem. One is mentorship/in-service and incentives for recruitment. According to the **PBC Schools website**, they have a very aggressive incentive program for teacher recruitment. The teacher retention programs are far less emphasized in comparison to the incentives for new hires. Many policies include debt relief, cash bonuses, paying for education, special mentoring programs, housing stipends, moving expenses and more.

School districts have implemented policies that allow teachers to teach out of field, work as long-term substitutes and generally ease the requirements and intentions of The No Child Left Behind Act. That act has the clear goal of providing a “highly qualified” teacher for every child and every classroom.