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The Challenges of Supporting New Teachers

A Conversation with Linda Darling-Hammond

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In this interview with *Educational Leadership*, Linda Darling-Hammond describes the kind of preparation and support new teachers need to survive their critical first years in the classroom.

Fifty years ago, Dan Lortie said the new teacher was like Robinson Crusoe, marooned on an island and facing challenges of survival. Modern Survivor images aside, is it still like that for beginning teachers?

It's still like that for some teachers, but less so than it once was. It's true that a number of beginners leave the teaching profession early because they don't feel effective. Sometimes they feel that they're crashing and burning, and sometimes, they really are.

But now most states have implemented some sort of professional development or peer assistance for new teachers. About three-fourths of new teachers report that they have participated in an induction program and have had a mentor teacher assigned to them.¹ A few states even have fully funded mentoring programs in which the mentors are expert teachers who have release time to be in the classroom coaching on a regular basis.

It's really important for beginners to have systematic, intense mentoring in the first year. Having weekly support and in-classroom coaching in the first year for fine-tuning skills, for planning lessons, and for problem solving about things that come up in the classroom ensures that someone experienced is there during the critical moments of the beginning teacher's first year.

That is the ideal way to make sure beginning teachers don't just survive but also become competent and effective—and stay in the profession.

You've noted that teacher preparation plays a big role in the retention of teachers. How does teacher preparation need to change?

In the old-style program, you took a bunch of courses and then did eight weeks of student teaching at the end of the courses. Candidates learned things in the abstract and then tended to forget much of what they learned by the time they actually got into a classroom. And the practices in their student-teaching classroom might not resemble those described in their courses. That antiquated, fragmented program is becoming a thing of the past.

Many teacher education programs have already changed so that they offer strong clinical experience connected to coursework. Many also have strengthened their preparation for curriculum development, assessment, and differentiated instruction. These things matter for keeping teachers in the profession.

We know that teachers who are fully prepared stay in teaching at much higher rates than those who lack key elements of preparation. Those who have done student teaching are less than half as likely to leave after the first year as those who haven't student taught. Those who have had coaching, been observed in their classrooms, and seen other people teach are less than half as likely to leave within the first year. Those who have had a chance to study child development, learning, and curriculum are less than half as likely to leave as those who have not had those opportunities.²

Being in the classroom of an effective mentor teacher for a long enough period of time, with graduated responsibilities, has a huge impact. Carefully managed student-teaching placement matters, too.

What is the current status of the professional development school? Has that movement been successful?

I just gave a talk to about 1,000 people at the annual conference of the National Association of Professional Development Schools. They came from across the United States and from several other nations and were all involved with thriving professional development schools. Many universities and schools together provide not only a clinical site for training teachers in the context of carefully mentored student teaching, but also a coherent program in which all of the courses are connected to the clinical work.

In these programs, the student learns specific practices, goes into the classroom and works on those practices, and then brings the experience back (sometimes with a videotape of the teaching or evidence of student work), debriefs, problem solves, learns some more, and takes it back to use in the classroom.

Of course, this requires collaborative planning between faculties in both the school and the university. The most powerful program models now enroll students in student teaching from the time they enter through the time they complete the program. Courses and student teaching are woven around each other, like a double helix.

Would you name a few of the professional development schools that have model programs?

I can name well over 100 schools that are doing very fine work.

It's certainly the model we use at Stanford. You see very high-quality work going on at Bank Street College, Columbia University, the University of Connecticut, the University of New Hampshire, the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, the University of South Carolina, and Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, among many others.

Why aren't we hearing about such programs more often?

In the United States right now, there is a tendency to assert that teacher education doesn't matter and that we don't have any good teacher education programs. There are some very weak programs still, and that's a problem we need to solve by raising the floor with stronger accreditation.

Because we don't talk much about the really good programs, these models don't drive improvement in the field as much as they could.

The alternative, short-term teacher prep programs are now training many new teachers. How have these programs affected the profession as a whole?

The initial rationale for alternative routes into teaching was a useful one: to provide options for older candidates who had already completed college. Twenty years ago, most teacher education was undergraduate only. Alternatives were designed, first and foremost, to provide pathways into teaching for people who already had a bachelor's degree. Many were graduate-level programs, awarding a Master of Arts in Teaching and lasting 12–18 months. They integrated intensive preservice clinical work and coursework in a thoughtful way. Some others provided coursework on a more flexible part-time basis so that candidates could begin preparation while they were employed at other jobs (for example, in transition from military employment).

Another good thing about many alternative routes was that they provided pathways directly into the districts that needed to hire the teachers—both urban and rural districts—where the shortages were.

The challenge we have with alternative programs now is that they are all over the map. Some offer high-quality programs and include enough coursework and student teaching to ensure that candidates are truly ready to teach. The graduates are well prepared, and they are well supported once they get in the classroom.

But there are also a lot of alternatives that offer only a few weeks of training in the summer before a teacher is thrown in as the teacher of record in the fall, without enough background knowledge or practice teaching. Then the promised mentoring support often does not materialize adequately. A lot of people coming in through those routes are not well prepared to teach. They struggle and flounder, and it hurts their students. Such routes also have very high attrition rates from teaching, leaving a lot of churn in their wake.

The core value of every profession is that everyone in the profession has a common body of knowledge and skills needed to be responsible and effective. When you have a lot of people coming in with very little training, confidence in the profession goes down. Lowering standards also drives salaries down, which then makes it hard to recruit and keep good people in the profession. The whole enterprise of teaching is seriously undermined.

When some people can't be trusted to know what to do, the system tends to respond by trying to micromanage teaching for everyone, mandating pacing guides and scripted texts. Lee Shulman used to call it an effort to create remote control of teaching.

The problem with standardizing teaching in that way is that *children* are not standardized. They don't learn in the same way or at the same pace. And if you are really engaged in professional teaching, you are trying to meet the needs of individual children. These responses to lack of confidence in teachers end up undermining instruction for children.

What policy change would be effective in attracting the best and brightest to the teaching profession?

The current conventional wisdom that teachers are not academically able is often wrong. A so-called "fact" that I often hear repeated is that most U.S. teachers are recruited from the bottom third of the class. That has not been true since the mid-1980s.

In fact, the most recent large-scale study on this question comes from Educational Testing Service, which tracked the SATs for teachers who completed preparation and sat for licensing examinations through 2005.³ From 1994 to 2005, there was a strong improvement in academic ability of entrants to the profession. By 2005, the average entering high school teacher scored well above the average college student in SAT verbal scores, and entering math and science teachers far outscored other college students in SAT math scores. Entering elementary teachers scored just above 500 on the SAT verbal and math tests. Over 80 percent of entering teachers had a college grade point average of 3.0 or above. So the bar has been raised, and we have been getting, nationwide, an increasingly high caliber of prospective teachers.

What are the reasons for the change?

There are much higher standards now than there were in the 1980s. Most states require a basic skills test, and many require a minimum grade point average to enter teacher training. Most require a test of subject-matter knowledge either before or after training. Some states have other licensure tests on top of those.

Because of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements and changes in state policy, today most secondary teachers receive a major in a content area, as do many elementary teachers. Fewer than half of those entering teaching receive an education major, and the expectations for education majors and minors have increased substantially in most states and universities.

In states with high standards—for example, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York—many high-ability people are coming into teaching. Even in states with lower standards—for example, Texas and Florida—individual universities often have higher standards than their states require. At top universities in the United States—like Columbia, Stanford, the University of California, and the University of Connecticut—the people who come into teacher education programs typically have SAT and GRE scores above the 80th or 90th percentile. They're every bit as academically able, and sometimes even more so, than the people in their doctoral programs.

Do we really need the best and the brightest to enter the profession?

We certainly want intelligent, academically capable people coming into teaching. Do they need to have 99th percentile SAT scores? That score, by itself, is not predictive of the capacity to teach. Some very smart people do not make good teachers. They don't have the interpersonal skills. They don't have the capacity to manage 55 things at once as teachers must do in a classroom.

We want in teachers a combination of strong academic ability and the capacities to be very alert and attentive, to care about kids, to be able to understand what kids are doing and what they mean by it, and to manage classrooms and support children. And, to be a good teacher, you have to care more about the performance of your students and how they learn than about your own performance.

Some very academically able people who go into teaching are used to getting rewarded for things they do by themselves. But it's a very different thing to help other people succeed. In teaching, your effectiveness doesn't depend on your own efforts alone. It depends on how well you can support and motivate your students to work at learning.

What can we learn from other countries about attracting the right kind of teachers?

There are several things to learn. If you look at the countries that once were not high achieving, but now are both high achieving and equitable in their student outcomes, you'll see that they have invested in teacher preparation and development programs to accomplish those gains. Finland, Singapore, and South Korea, for example, not only invest in high-quality preparation, but also pay all of the costs for candidates to get that preparation. They also give candidates a stipend while they are in training, so that no one has to go into debt to enter teaching or suffer from less preparation than they need.

So we could easily recruit and retain the best and brightest teachers if we actually made good on what President Obama said when he was campaigning: "If you will teach, we'll pay for your college education."

States that have done that have raised the bar. For many years, the North Carolina Teaching Fellows underwrote top high school students' college education at state universities where they prepared to teach and added additional summer coursework to help them learn to become education leaders. In exchange for this support, candidates pledged to teach for at

least four years in North Carolina schools. The state brought many thousands of high-ability people into teaching that way, with a disproportionate number of them in high-need fields like math and science, plus a large representation of men and minority candidates, who are usually in short supply. A follow-up study seven years later showed that more than 75 percent of these folks were still in teaching, and some of the remainder were already working in education administration.

North Carolina Teaching Fellows did essentially what some nations have done: select and support high-ability people who have demonstrated a commitment and enthusiasm to work with children. These people not only enter but also build their careers in the profession and become leaders and raise up the whole system.

And why isn't this happening more often?

There is unfortunately a lot of teacher bashing and bad-mouthing of the profession these days. Some politicians and philanthropists have adopted a very punitive and shortsighted approach—putting an emphasis on sanctions based on test scores and not on training, development, or equalization of resources, and then urging the firing of teachers whose students do not score well on tests. This leaves teachers underprepared and undersupported to do the important job they need to do. It is no way to build a profession. In fact, it creates an anti-profession.

I just read the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, which said that U.S. teachers' satisfaction with their profession had declined 15 points. Is that surprising to you?

I just looked at that, too, and it's not surprising. That drop in satisfaction was in just two years after 2009. The decline was closer to 20 percentage points if you go back to 2008. The survey also showed that the proportion of teachers planning to leave had increased by 12 percent in just two years. These last three years have been devastating for teaching. All over the United States I hear from teachers that they are discouraged, particularly by the way national discourse assumes that all the ills of the system are the sole fault of teachers.

And it's going to become much, much worse as test-based teacher evaluation is rolled out. Researchers have extensive evidence that the ratings teachers get from these value-added systems are hugely error-prone, unreliable, and to a great extent, shaped by which students are assigned to a teacher in a given year.⁴

All of the things that are happening to undermine education today—larger class sizes, fewer days in the school year, reductions in the number of reading specialists and tutors, growing poverty and homelessness among children—influence achievement gains and contribute to what is being called a "teacher effectiveness" rating. The effect of *everything* that matters for learning is being attributed to the teacher alone. And teachers who teach the highest-need students are most affected by both the unfairness of current education policies and the bias in teacher effectiveness ratings.

What are better ways to evaluate teachers, especially beginning teachers?

We know a lot now about how to undertake high-quality performance assessments of teachers. Since the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards portfolio was created in the late 1980s, several states have developed similar assessments for beginning teachers. Teachers are asked to plan a unit of instruction linked to the standards in their content area, to adapt their plans for English learners and students with special needs, to teach the unit, and then to be videotaped while teaching these lessons. They also collect evidence of student learning and analyze both their teaching and the student learning that resulted.

Connecticut developed its BEST Portfolio to guide learning for beginning teachers and then to determine the candidates' readiness for a professional credential after two years in the classroom. Research shows that the scores on that portfolio significantly predicted teachers' effectiveness with students.

There are now 27 states piloting a national version of a performance assessment for the initial license, which builds on the success of California's Performance Assessment for Teachers. A number of those states are beginning to think about also using a related performance assessment during the first two or three years of teaching that continues to build on the initial portfolio and that could become the basis for achieving the professional credential. These kinds of tools, plus the kinds of close-in evaluation and support provided by mentors in districts that have adopted peer assistance and review programs, have also been found to improve effectiveness.

That's what we should be doing with beginning teachers: using professional teaching standards and thoughtful support and evaluation processes to give them the feedback that they need.

One last point on the test-based teacher evaluations: Teachers who are subjected to those systems are saying that they can't draw any relationship between what they do from year to year and how their ratings bounce around. As a teacher in Houston put it: "I do what I do every year. I teach the way I teach every year. My first year got me pats on the back. My second year got me kicked in the backside. And for year three my scores were off the charts. I got a huge bonus, and now I am in the top quartile of all the English teachers. What did I do differently? I have no clue."⁵

So a test-based evaluation doesn't actually help people get better at their teaching because it's an unpredictable, erratic, confusing measure that basically puts more noise in the system.

Schools and education leaders can't always change the policies affecting teachers, but what might they do to

support their teachers?

Teachers want to be in environments where they are going to be successful with students, where they're getting help to do that, where they have good colleagues, where they're working as a team. Teachers, especially those just entering the profession, are generally collaboratively oriented people.

What great schools, great principals, and great school teams know is that you support teachers by structuring group collaboration for planning curriculum, by building professional learning communities, by encouraging ongoing inquiry into practice.

The schools that build those kinds of environments give teachers continuous opportunities to grow and learn, provide the tools they need to do their job, and enable them to build good relationships with parents so they can work as partners on behalf of the child.

This may mean reorganizing the schedule, but in building those systems, leaders personalize the school environment. All of those things really are what will help teachers learn—and become happy and successful in their work.

Endnotes

¹ See Wei, R. C., Darling-Hammond, L., & Adamson, F. (2010). *Professional development in the United States: Trends and challenges*. Dallas, TX: National Staff Development Council, p. 28.

² Darling-Hammond, L. (2003). [Keeping good teachers: Why it matters, what leaders can do](#). *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), pp. 6–13.

³ Gitomer, D. (2007). *Teacher quality in a changing policy landscape: Improvements in the teacher pool*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

⁴ Darling-Hammond, L., Amrein-Beardsley, A., Haertel, E., & Rothstein, J. (2012). *Evaluating teacher evaluation*. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 93(6), p. 11.

⁵ Darling-Hammond, L., Amrein-Beardsley, A., Haertel, E., & Rothstein, J. (2012). *Evaluating teacher evaluation*. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 93(6), p. 11.

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