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What All Novices Need

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Alternatively certified teachers told us that to feel successful, they needed the very things that come with traditional preparation programs.

The one thing I wish I had more time to do is observe teachers. [I learn more] when I reflect and compare my methods and practices with those of other teachers.

These words are Kaitlyn's, a first-year high school English teacher who entered her classroom as *the* teacher, with full responsibility, having received only a summer's worth of teacher preparation.

Kaitlyn is part of the movement aimed at getting high-performing college graduates to serve as teachers in challenging classrooms. Because Kaitlyn was a proficient undergraduate student and is dedicated to helping students who live in poverty, it is assumed that she is prepared to walk in and teach immediately. However, on the basis of what Kaitlyn and others in her situation told us, such novices feel the need for more teacher preparation.

As more teachers enter classrooms through truncated preparation programs, comparisons of the practices of teachers emerging from traditional routes and those coming from alternative routes spark two questions: Does teacher education matter?¹ What practices are most important for preparing teachers?

Although the line between what constitutes an alternative or a traditional route to teaching is somewhat blurred, two of the primary differences between these routes are the length of preparation and whether candidates have a supervised field experience before taking on classroom teaching responsibility. Kaitlyn's program, for instance, provides one summer of training and lacks student teaching. It routes precertified candidates right into schools as full-time educators who can elect, if they wish, to simultaneously take a full load of education coursework toward a master's degree. Such programs bridge the divide between preservice preparation and no preparation, while meeting the immediate needs of both the school districts and the prospective teachers who want to enter the classroom expeditiously.²

Asking What They Need

Preparing novices for the teaching profession while they're teaching full time provides a distinctive opportunity to learn what new teachers need most as they transition into teaching and which experiences are particularly relevant for new teachers with little formal preparation. As educators who help prepare such teachers, we decided to ask them directly.

Johns Hopkins University partners with a well-known alternative certification program to provide graduate-level education courses to its precertified teaching fellows. Each semester, Anika assigns her students—who are all first-year secondary-level

English teachers who came to teaching through this alternative program—to suggest three things teacher preparation programs should offer.

At the time they wrote their suggestions, these teachers were all teaching in low-income urban middle and high schools. They were at the end of their first semester of teaching, a unique and fragile time in a new teacher's learning trajectory. Many new teachers find that their idealism shatters in this first semester, and they begin to question whether their choice of profession was wise. After a semester of real classroom experiences, Kaitlyn and her classmates had much to share about the kinds of preparation that would help them become confident, effective teachers. Their comments suggested six experiences that alternative preparation programs should offer.

1. Opportunities to Learn from Experts

The most frequently mentioned wish was the opportunity to both observe high-quality veteran teachers and receive observation, feedback, and mentoring from them. Novices also wanted more chances to talk, formally and informally, with veteran educators. New teachers expressed such sentiments as, "I've found [I have an extremely strong] desire to peer into the classrooms of expert teachers" and "Teacher education programs should give new teachers the opportunity to observe expert teachers for an extended period of time before entering the classroom."

2. Guidance on How to Teach Content

Many teachers expressed a need to learn strategies for teaching content in meaningful, age-appropriate ways. As Ann put it,

How [do I] provide distinctive learning experiences for different grade levels? It's part of the reason I struggle so much with teaching English. My kids don't learn anything; all they do is practice things ... I would like to be able to teach.

As successful undergraduate students, these alternatively certified teachers had been considered content experts, but in the classroom, they realized that being a strong *student* of content did not equate being a successful *teacher* of that content. They needed to learn how to convey their subject matter expertise and passion to students.

3. Help with Logistics

The logistics of teaching, everything from setting up the classroom to devising a template for lesson planning, was another area of concern. Once they got into the classroom, novices recognized that they needed to not only plan instruction, but also how to lay out their room and arrange materials and activities in a way that encouraged learning. They wanted their teacher preparation programs to help them establish routines, set up behavior management systems, arrange their classroom, and plan daily lessons. Richard stated,

Some of my biggest obstacles as a first-year teacher lie not around planning and pedagogy, but around binders and bins. How do I organize an effective folder system? Which books should I seek for my library? Which papers should I keep and which can I toss?

4. Experience with Students

Respondents wanted a chance to know, before they entered the classroom, what "real students" are like. In traditional programs, student teachers have the opportunity to try out their teaching methods with students before assuming full classroom responsibility. Alternatively certified teachers wanted this, too.

Several of them suggested that teacher preparation programs provide opportunities for preservice teachers to bond with students of the same ages and backgrounds as those they would eventually encounter in their classrooms. Joseph described an ideal teacher preparation program as one in which "school-age students [would] come in to critique [our lessons]. The teacher would execute the lesson and instead of the professor critiquing, a child would provide feedback."

5. Help with Managing Expectations

Because many alternate-route teachers enter classrooms with neither training in pedagogy nor field experience, they often have idealistic views of what it means to be the teacher. Once they are full-time teachers, many are overwhelmed by the realities. Respondents wanted their preparation programs to include both honest discussions of the realities of teaching and concrete help in managing mismatched expectations, if they arise. As Mark stated,

Going from zero experience to full-blown teacher in a month is borderline absurd. [There need to be] serious discussions about expectations. I was never going to walk in the door and make an instantaneous difference, but that was my expectation ... I was in no way prepared to deal with what I perceived to be constant failure at the beginning of the year.

6. Time for Reflection

Many first-year teachers feel they lack time to reflect about what happens in the classroom and consider implications for future practice. Our respondents wanted their preparation programs to include assignments that required them to reflect thoughtfully on their practice in terms of planning, instruction, and working with students. They recognized that teacher reflection benefits students. One wrote, "I think a class designed around student reflection with [experienced teachers or teacher educators] over a long period would [help a teacher] turn meaningful reflection into meaningful action."

Two Ways to Improve Alternative Preparation

Alternative certification candidates seem to want many things from their preparation experiences that are part of traditional teacher certification programs. Many items on their wish lists—such as the chance to know what real students are like—are the very things student teaching provides.

Yet traditional, multiyear preparation for all teacher candidates isn't always the answer. Many challenged districts need to get full-time, high-quality teachers into classrooms quickly, and many people seek alternative routes to save time and for financial benefits. Teacher candidates often need the stipend or tuition reimbursement that comes with alternative route partnerships. In many cases, as teachers of record, precertified teachers receive a full salary and negotiated teacher benefits, which makes alternative routes appealing for career changers.

How might alternative certification programs give their participants some of the preparation experiences they desire without compromising the staffing needs of school districts or the candidates' own needs? We offer two suggestions.

Start Programs Sooner

We should begin preparation experiences for teacher candidates in alternative programs sooner than the summer before their first teaching assignment. One summer offers too little time to engage candidates in the kinds of experiences they want and need. Although many districts offer preservice teachers summer school teaching opportunities, usually neither the summer school conditions nor the students reflect the realities that teachers will encounter during the school year.

Starting learning experiences earlier, perhaps in January, would allow more time for candidates to ease into the teaching role. Whether candidates are in their final year of undergraduate coursework or their final months of a career they'll leave for teaching, many of them could spend time in schools during the spring semester. This could be a ripe time for engaging with both students and experienced teachers. Making the starting month January would require candidates to apply for programs sooner and would require program recruiters to alter time lines for meeting, assessing, and interviewing potential recruits, but such adjustments are worth considering.

Use Half-Time Teaching Assignments

Another strategy is to restructure classroom teaching assignments for precertified teachers as job-sharing experiences. Two precertified teacher candidates might cover a full-time teaching position between them, or an experienced teacher might be released to work part time and share a teaching position with a novice. At the elementary level, each half-time teacher could teach for half the day, or two halftime teachers could divide the standard subject areas between them. A reduced teaching load would relieve some pressure and free up several hours in a first-year teacher's schedule. This could be a best-of-both-worlds situation: Novices would be immersed in the actual work of teaching, but the reduced schedule would honor the fact that they're still students of the profession.

Although early-career teachers crave time with experts, they like to have an authority figure, such as their principal or college professor, mandate such interaction. Teacher educators could, for example, ask precertified novices to work with experienced colleagues or to reflect on their teaching. New teachers would have time to not only learn about pedagogy in their coursework, but also directly apply it to their teaching and collaborate with colleagues.

It's Our Responsibility

The responses of these precertified new teachers indicate that some candidates who enter alternative certification programs realize what they're missing once they actually start teaching. By that point, it's not feasible to pull out of one route and start another. If most alternative routes to the classroom bypass the very things alternatively certified novices want, it behooves those who work with novices—and those structuring alternative programs—to think about how to approximate the more traditional experiences these candidates would find helpful. This is particularly important for school districts that hire many such teachers.

The experiences and opportunities described here offer insights for induction, mentoring, alternative certification, and teacher education programs. We have a responsibility to look closely at teacher preparation practices—and to consider the ethical dimension of having teachers who've had little time to develop pedagogical expertise serving as teachers of record for students in challenged schools. We must continue to seek input from alternative certification candidates about what they need. Alternative certification program districts and teacher education programs must ensure high-quality preparation for all

teachers.

Endnotes

¹ Darling-Hammond, L., Holtzman, D., Gattin, S., & Vasquez Heilig, J. (2005). Does teacher preparation matter? Evidence about teacher certification, Teach for America, and teacher effectiveness. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 13, 42. Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/147>

² National Center for Education Information. (2005). *Alternate routes are attracting talented individuals from other careers who otherwise would not become teachers*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from www.ncei.com/part.html.

Author's note: All names are pseudonyms.

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