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What's Missing from Teacher Prep

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Beginning teachers and their mentors voice discontent about what their teacher preparation programs left out.

Our judgment came slowly, after watching scores of beginning teachers struggle in their first few years—unable to manage student behavior or motivate students; unsure how to plan for short-term or long-term instruction; unable to distinguish an objective from an activity; insecure about differentiating lessons to meet a range of student needs. As district administrators, after hearing too many young teachers lose their confidence and bemoan their struggles, we could only reach one conclusion: Teacher preparation institutions need to transform their programs to reflect the realities of 21st century schools.

Universities must form new partnerships with schools, with the goal of better preparing preservice teachers to deal with the increasing demands for skillful classroom management, student motivation, lesson design, assessment construction and interpretation, intervention strategies, and differentiation. Only through radical retooling will teacher preparation programs produce graduates who can meet the professional expectations found in high-performing schools.

From the Mouths of New Teachers

This manifesto may sound self-serving and brazen coming from public school administrators. It's always easy to tell others what changes they need to make. However, in spite of our district's robust teacher orientation program—which includes a variety of targeted workshops followed by individual observations and coaching for every new teacher—we have seen stressed new teachers work assiduously, but not successfully, to create effective classroom environments. These observations led us to question the quality of some of the teacher preparation programs from which we hire a majority of our district's teachers.

We decided to go right to the teachers themselves and ask them how prepared they believed they were. We conducted two formal focus groups with about 30 teachers in each group. One focus group consisted of teachers with three months to three years of teaching experience, representing 17 universities. The second group consisted of experienced teachers who were trained mentors of beginning teachers. The comments made by both groups shed light on the gaps in many universities' preparation programs.

The recent graduates of teacher preparation programs were highly critical of professors who have not been in a public school classroom for 20-plus years; they stated that these professors had "a credibility gap." They believed that student teaching, rather than the lessons they experienced in university classrooms, was the most effective component of their preservice learning.

Many of these teachers reflected, however, that their student-teaching programs had few or no standard activities or goals; therefore, the quality of their experiences depended entirely on the knowledge and skills of their cooperating or mentor

teachers. Given the important role of cooperating teachers in the student-teaching experience, the new teachers indicated that colleges need to ensure that the skills and the commitment of assigned cooperating teachers are exemplary and that the cooperating teachers themselves are models of best practice.

Here is what the focus groups in our study wanted to tell their alma maters about what was missing from their preparation programs.

"We didn't understand what's required of a professional."

Universally, the new teachers reported that their preservice education did not prepare them for the physical and mental stress they experienced in their classrooms. The workload and the expectation that they simultaneously manage multiple demands are serious challenges for new teachers. Teachers told us that their college programs placed little emphasis on developing the professional habits of mind essential to building a viable teaching career. They also indicated that their preparation did not help them develop the skills needed to be highly collaborative and active contributors in professional learning communities.

To deepen preservice teachers' understanding of the physical and mental demands of the job, universities and school districts should collaboratively build on-site teacher preparation programs that emphasize specific professional habits—such as the ability to reflect on one's own teaching, which includes accurately assessing the effectiveness of the chosen instructional strategies and creating appropriate and targeted interventions. Preservice teachers should be exposed to the intense work of the typical classroom teacher over a much longer time, supported by a continuum of preservice and new-teacher mentoring.

"We didn't learn how to teach content."

Focus-group participants reported that they were not sufficiently prepared in content pedagogy—especially in teaching reading, whether at the elementary or secondary level. Coursework in reading instruction was often too generalized and not useful in their actual schools. Elementary teachers indicated that they had received insufficient instruction in mathematics, science, and writing, making them poorly prepared for the detailed lesson preparation expected of them. No college coursework addressed what to do if students don't learn the material the way the teacher taught it the first time. Teachers indicated that they had little experience in using daily formative assessments to diagnose student needs, a crucial skill in today's highly accountable schools.

Teacher preparation programs must align their content preparation for elementary and secondary preservice teachers with the major curriculum changes being generated in many states in response to the common core state standards. There is no place for outdated or poorly aligned teacher preparation in reading, writing, and mathematics if we expect our students to demonstrate strong achievement on internationally benchmarked tests.

"We didn't grasp the essentials of classroom management."

Respondents reported that coursework having to do with student management and establishing classroom routines was of little value when they were confronted with real students. Both mentors and new teachers pointed to the new teachers' lack of fundamental, research-based strategies to manage classroom behavior in a positive way.

University teacher preparation programs should directly teach the foundational skills that many state departments of education publish for their professional teaching workforce. For example, Connecticut's *2010 Common Core of Teaching* (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2010) delineates specific ways in which teachers can create active, engaging, student-centered classroom environments—by using technology strategically, designing purposeful discourse and inquiry-based learning, providing meaningful feedback to students, and so on. In addition, many educational researchers, such as Charlotte Danielson (2007) have published guidance on how to maintain effective, productive classroom environments.

Preservice programs should give teachers in training multiple exposures to ways to manage student behavior to maximize student learning. New teachers must also have the support of university preparation and district induction programs that directly teach them how to build good relationships in the classroom.

"We didn't know how to plan for instruction."

Respondents indicated that their exposure to lesson planning in college was artificial and minimally useful. Assignments were often contrived. The new teachers reported that they were required to design rubrics for lessons that they quickly realized would not work in real situations. They were told to develop "engaging" lessons, but they did not know their audiences, never actually presented lessons, and therefore never learned whether their designs were, in fact, engaging.

They also noted that they were never presented with the "bigger planning picture," and they lacked the knowledge to do long-term planning. They spoke of the need to observe short-term and long-term planning in real classrooms, with real teachers who do it well every day.

High-quality preservice and induction programs must give novices opportunities to work side by side with master teachers on planning for instruction. University professors and on-site master teachers should model lesson and unit planning, delivery, and assessment. Preservice preparation in curriculum and instruction must prepare new teachers to deeply understand and

organize subject matter, to see the relationships among concepts, to develop students' understanding through a variety of instructional strategies that fit the subject matter, and to use technology appropriately to enhance instruction.

"We needed to better understand student engagement."

Beginners and mentors both commented that the new teachers had received insufficient exposure to strategies for motivating students. They were unprepared to apply differentiated instruction practices, constructivist activities, or cooperative-grouping strategies. Beginners felt especially ill-prepared to motivate reluctant or recalcitrant students.

Preparation for preservice teachers must focus on connecting their students' prior knowledge, life experiences, and interests to learning goals; locating and using a variety of instructional strategies to respond to students' diverse needs; building students' independence and group work skills; and especially, engaging students in solving real-world problems to make content more meaningful and exciting. Master teachers should model these student engagement practices on-site during clinical experiences. University preparation can focus on the rich research base underpinning student choice, student learning groups, motivation, and student engagement practices.

"We needed to learn how to integrate technology."

Our focus groups told us that the use of technology in preservice classrooms was limited, and training in how to integrate technology into lesson planning was virtually nonexistent. There was little or no instruction using the International Society for Technology in Education's (2008) *National Education Technology Standards for Teachers*. Digital citizenship was not a focus in coursework, even though cyberbullying and the misuse of technology are serious concerns in many schools. For the most part, the new teachers learned on the job how to use technology for instruction.

Universities must embed technology into their coursework in all classes, not just those taught by tech-savvy professors. It is especially important to ensure that preservice teachers have experiences and develop expertise with the following skills: using information databases to find accurate and appropriate knowledge quickly when solving problems, using technology ethically and professionally, using technology to organize and present new learning, and engaging students through technology-rich instruction.

"We needed experience using and managing student achievement data."

Beginners told us that they had little experience with analyzing the evidence of student learning. Many admitted that they were unfamiliar with the terms *formative* and *summative* assessment until they were interviewed for a teaching position. Some new teachers admitted that they were taught general concepts about data gathering, but this introduction did not extend to using data to revise or differentiate instruction.

It is crucial for universities to give preservice teachers experience in examining real student work using prescribed protocols, as well as interpreting that student work with intervention in mind. Preservice teachers must work with master teachers in clinical experiences to collect and analyze all manner of formative assessment data, focusing on what the data show about students' mastery of specific learning objectives. Both universities and districts must teach new teachers about performance-based assessment and what information these tools provide. New teachers should be prepared to use these alternative assessment practices in classrooms right away, in lieu of using only traditional paper-and-pencil tests that assess skills and knowledge in isolation.

"We were unprepared to differentiate instruction."

A significant number of new teachers indicated that they had one class dealing with how to identify disabilities, but no training in how to modify instruction to teach children with special needs. The comment, "I learned what I needed to know by coteaching once I got here" reflected the common experience of the group. Many teachers indicated that they had not ever seen an individualized education program or a Section 504 plan, and they were unaware of what to expect of a planning and placement team process.

Several new teachers and their mentors claimed that their preparation did not help them connect theory and school reality when it came to students with special learning needs or English language learners. Respondents overwhelmingly reported that professors kept mentioning "differentiation" in classes but provided no detailed explanation of what it looked like in actual practice. Some of the new teachers reported that any focus on differentiation in their college coursework was on high-ability or low-ability students only—never on differentiating instruction on the basis of formative assessment data or student interests.

Once they entered the classroom, new teachers told of spending many hours working on lessons to engage students with attention and motivation problems. Because engaging individual students in learning is at the very heart of the daily life of classroom teachers, it is crucial for university programs to address this teacher preparation gap.

How We Can Change Teacher Preparation

Changing teacher preparation to match the expectations of today's teaching profession will require new forms of collaboration

between universities and schools. We propose that universities partner with a limited number of K–12 schools and educators—those who will uphold specific professional standards and who are willing to help develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of preservice teachers by providing high-quality preparation and induction experiences. Dedicated and highly skilled public school teachers should provide contracted, paid services to the university (for example, coaching preservice teachers in planning detailed lessons, collecting and using student data, or integrating digital tools into instruction) and then be evaluated on their contribution to building well-prepared teaching professionals.

Generally speaking, the required grade point average for entrance to teacher preparation programs should be increased. Prospective teachers must demonstrate that they are skillful readers, writers, and researchers—and most important, that they have a passionate commitment to becoming a teacher. Teacher candidates should begin their clinical preparation for teaching in the second semester of their freshman year with actual classroom observations and experiences. We believe that preservice teachers should form their own professional learning cadres, as part of their university program, to reflect on their school-based experiences as a group. This will help them develop the collegial behaviors they will need to participate in professional learning communities.

Preservice teaching cohorts should complete 48 hours in directed observations and practicum experiences each semester. Colleges should design directed observations that assign cohorts to a specific school for a clearly articulated purpose—for example, to observe the individualized education program process at work, to see how a professional learning community sets goals and develops assessments, to observe the actual delivery of services to English language learners, to develop and provide interventions for targeted students, or to plan and execute a guided reading lesson.

Preparing Teachers for a Different World

The teacher of today faces more demands than ever before. That teacher must have the confidence and skill to assess and respond to a wide range of student needs with engaging, relevant, tightly focused lessons that not only present content, but also teach students how to read, write, speak, listen, collaborate, research, and integrate technology. The teacher preparation programs and student-teaching experiences found in many universities are archaic vestiges that do not reflect the world of today's teacher and learner.

Our new teachers are telling us that their university teacher preparation programs are not preparing them well. K–12 schools and universities must join forces to re-create teacher preparation and ensure that every classroom will have a teacher who possesses a clear understanding of excellent professional practice—and can apply it from day one.

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