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ABSTRACT

This paper describes 10 factors that impact misguided perceptions of teacher preparation and teacher quality, especially elementary teachers prepared in highly-structured, university-based teacher preparation programs: (1) the offshoot of P-12 preparation, prior to attending postsecondary programs; (2) alignment of certification tests to state mandates for teacher preparation (i.e., legislated courses and content versus state or national certification tests); (3) student achievement test scores (i.e., children in grades K-6) as a way to assess the quality of teacher preparation and then holding the teacher preparation program responsible for those test scores; (4) aggregated test score data required through Title II; (5) hiring practices of school districts (i.e., the number of teachers who are uncertified, temporarily certified, or teaching out of field); (6) state and national regulations and policies governing teacher preparation programs (i.e., mandating national accreditation and state specific program approval processes); (7) few alternative certification portals address the elementary routes; (8) professional development opportunities for beginning teachers; (9) practice versus experience; and (10) the difference between a highly qualified teacher and a qualified teacher. (SM)

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Catheryn J. Weitman and Ronald P. Colbert

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By

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Overview

Long before President Bush persuaded Congress to enact the No Child Left Behind Act, teacher preparation programs were berated, by the general public and public officials alike, for their inability to produce not only high quality elementary teachers, but also teachers with adequate backgrounds in content knowledge. Calls for qualified teachers in every public classroom began in the early 1990s with the rising concern over teacher shortages. Beginning with the 1986 Holmes Report, and possibly, "The Nation at Risk" Report, institutions that were preparing teachers, especially elementary teachers, were targeted for their lack of preparation in the content fields of mathematics, science, and geography. Waning career interest in these fields and in teaching math and science in general, coupled with declining national and international test scores, intensified the debate over ill-prepared elementary teachers. With passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, elementary teachers are once again being cited as unprepared—this time with teaching reading skills to their students.

Along with these professional accusations is the increased demand at both the state and national levels for more accountability of pre-service teachers. Predictably, these accountability measures focused on teacher testing. Elementary teachers, regardless of the state, now face a

battery of tests. All but seven states mandate tests for certification (Title II Data Collection, 2001). These usually include a basic skills test prior to admission into the teacher preparation programs; a subject matter test on content, usually taught by elementary teachers; and a professional (pedagogy) test. The latter two tests are needed for either graduation or certification, depending upon the state. During the 1990s, state mandates increased certification testing, including the area of basic skills for elementary teachers; increased general education content for elementary teachers; decreased emphasis on pedagogy content; and called for reforms of teacher preparation programs. Yet, with all of this activity occurring, elementary teachers are still scrutinized and criticized for not being subject qualified or adequately prepared for their profession.

However, a close analysis of the controversy ought to be conducted and resolved not by judgment of teacher preparation programs, but by examination of other factors that impact the apparent and perceived lack of quality of elementary teachers. We contend these other factors, rather than teacher education programs, are the major contributing issues that reap the outcries about ill-prepared elementary teachers. Few of these factors are directly related to elementary teacher preparation programs.

Other Factors Influencing Perceptions

These factors and contributing issues that preclude the notion that elementary teachers are ill-prepared are listed below. (The fundamental factor is italicized and underscored. Supporting comments follow afterwards.)

1. *The off shoot of P-12 preparation, prior to attending post-secondary programs.*

   California, Florida, New York, and Texas, to name a few, require the passage of an exit exam from high school in order to graduate. However, students are graduating

from high school, passing high school exit tests; yet testing into remedial courses within three months of their high school graduation. There seems to be some misalignment in high school graduation requirements in basic competencies and those required for success in post-secondary education. Some critics have determined that education majors comprise the majority of students in these post secondary remedial classes. Others contend that lower SAT scores are obtained by future educators more than by those going into other professions. However, as this situation reflects, the backgrounds of future elementary teachers represent the P-12 pre-post secondary educational curriculums they received in school—not knowledge acquired in schools, colleges, and departments (SCD) of education.

2. *Alignment of certification tests to state mandates for teacher preparation (i.e., legislated courses and content vs. state or national certification tests).* More and more states are aligning both state and national standards for teacher preparation. For example, Florida just realigned its general knowledge (i.e., basic skills) test to the P-12 standards potential teachers *ought to have obtained* during their own schooling. Yet the institutions of higher learning, and more particularly SCDs of education, are held accountable, criticized, and even discredited for the lack of adequate liberal arts or general education backgrounds of students who obtained those backgrounds *prior to* full admission into teacher education programs, which typically occurs during the third year of college. Alignment of certification tests with course content is critical. Not only is the general education background an issue, but also the scores obtained on elementary teachers' subject matter tests give the impression that ill-prepared teachers lacking basic skills and subject matter content are the direct result of educational

preparation, *not the preparation prior to, admission into these programs.* As state certification tests are used to rank institutions, and categorized them into quartiles, low test scores on basic skills and subject matter should be a responsibility lying outside the SCDs of education. Yet, Title II of the Higher Education Act ranks *SCDs of education* at the institution, *not previously attended high schools, community colleges, or the arts and sciences schools* who are responsible and/or aid in the preparation of the very issue that is at the heart of the so called ill-prepared elementary teachers--a lack of subject matter knowledge.

3. *Student achievement test scores (i.e., children in grades K-6) as a way to assess the quality of teacher preparation and then holding the teacher preparation program responsible for those test scores.* With the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, one area of increased accountability impacting elementary teachers is the accountability directly linked to their students' math achievement beginning with third grade assessments. This accountability involves not only the teachers' subject matter content knowledge but pedagogy as well (i.e., how well teachers teach so that children can learn). Yet, only *one* of these two abilities (i.e., pedagogy) is the direct responsibility of SCDs of education; obtaining the subject matter content is not. Why then are SCDs of education held accountable for subject matter content?
4. *Aggregated test score data required through Title II.* The reality is that most SCDs of education (and/or state policy) require passage of all certification tests prior to graduation. So what most states and schools now report is a skewed status of their teacher education graduates, including those in the elementary field. For example, most SCDs of education now require elementary education graduates to pass all

certification tests as a program completer requirement. A sampling of the largest four states (i.e., California, Florida, New York, and Texas) revealed an average passing rate range of 88%-97% (Title II Data Collection, 2001). All but one state reported a passing percent rate less than 94%. Yet, these are deceiving numbers because some states require a basic skills test for certification; some do not. Those that do so, have difference percentages than states that do have to report basic skills scores used for certification. Scanning tests scores on professional knowledge from these four states reveal increased score ranges from 99% to 90% (Title II Data Collection, 2001). What this means, in many cases, is that 100% of the graduates passing these tests. Those that do not pass the tests do not graduate. All four of these states have this policy.

5. *Hiring practices of school districts (i.e., the number of teachers who are uncertified, on temporary certifications, or teaching "out-of-field")*. Hiring practices of high poverty districts or urban low performing schools often reflect contracts to elementary teachers who are likely to be the least experienced, uncertified, and out-of-field. Data collected from the 2001 Title II State Reports, reveal that the percentage of teachers not fully certified in these schools is higher than the average of non-certified teachers placed across the entire district. Proposals and partnerships for increasing math and science achievement put forth through Bush's No Child Left Behind Act acknowledge that poor performance of elementary students are due, in part, to *not having* enough "in-field" fully certified elementary teachers in the classroom.

6. *State and national regulations and policies governing teacher preparation programs (i.e., mandating national accreditation and state specific program approval processes, which including increased rigor for admission into teacher education programs).* Many states link program approval to national accreditation (e.g., New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, and West Virginia). If the elementary program, for example, does not meet the criteria for national accreditation, the program will not be allowed to operate. Accrediting agencies like the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) have increased the rigor through which national accreditation is obtained. Likewise, the requirements for admission into teacher education programs have become so rigorous that entering freshman are well advised to declare education as a major from the onset.
7. *Few alternative certification portals address the elementary routes.* By 1998, more than 40 states had created alternative certification programs. These programs were typically developed as master's degree programs for non-educators. As such, these programs maintained the caliber, quality, and certification requirements typically found in traditional undergraduate programs. However more common are the offshoots of alternative programs that involve an "inductive alternative portal." Induction portals are those that place individuals with subject-matter non-education bachelor's degrees (e.g., biology, mathematics, law) directly into the classroom. This portal is "indistinguishable from long-standing emergency (or temporary) hiring practices that fill vacancies with individuals who have not met standard teaching requirements. Short term alternatives (such as these) typically require only a few weeks of formal preparation and rely (solely) on on-the-job supervision" (Darling-

Hammond, Berry, Haselkorn, & Fideler, 1999, p. 208). The majority of these inductive programs focus on content specific backgrounds for middle school and high school needs. Relatively few are available for elementary teachers. Yet, when the quality of elementary teachers is judged, the only model condemned is the traditional university-based teacher preparation model.

8. *Professional development opportunities for beginning teachers (such as mentorship and support; placement and/or assignment).* One effective way to revamp the educational system is to establish systemic and sustaining mentoring and support programs for beginning teachers. These programs should be coupled with career-long professional development backed by community and professional organizations, including unions. Successful examples of this type of backing is very evident is states with high numbers of National Board Certified teachers (e.g., North Carolina and Florida). All of these entities need to refocus efforts on a collaborative vision of mentoring and supporting mechanisms, which emphasize retention of teachers in the field. Initial placements or assignments of beginning teachers are often in the most unrewarding settings without much mentorship or support provided. Refocusing is needed to provide beginning teachers with resources and access to knowledge of learning, which directly links to their classroom work with *their* students. Ball and Cohen (1999) call this concept a "curriculum for professional education (that) "centers on professional inquiry in practice" (p. 24). Emerging research in urban districts that implement such teacher support systems reveal that retention of new teachers increased. Previously, retention was 50% after 3-5 years in the field. Urban

districts using supportive and mentoring processes increased retention rates to "85% and 90%" (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1999, p. 400).

9. *Practice vs. Experience*. To further confuse the perceptions about the quality of elementary teachers prepared through university-based programs, is the issue of "practice vs. experience." There is an undercurrent of thought regarding these two notions as they pertain to the preparation of teachers. This thought supports the contention that if one indeed only knows the subject to be taught (especially through a background in liberal arts), then *experience, not practice*, is all one needs to become an effective and hence a qualified teacher. From the teacher preparation view, there are differences between pre-service practice and in-service experience. If we move to the model proposed that knowledge is all one needs to be effective and that experience compensates for adequate practice or preparation, then why have states like Colorado mandated 800 pre-service practice hours? Research tells us that the more pre-professional practice individuals have in the field prior to employment, the more effective they are in the classroom (and the more likely they are to remain in the field).

10. *The difference between a highly qualified teacher and a qualified teacher.* Much has been written on both types of teachers. Darling-Hammond's report on "What Matters Most" calls for a qualified teacher in every classroom. Recent legislation in some states (e.g., Florida) call for pre-service placements in highly qualified teachers' classrooms. Yet, distinctions between these two types of teachers are hard to locate. Recently, an individual employed with a large urban teachers union was asked about what constituted a *highly qualified teacher*. The response given was that a *highly*

qualified teacher was "one who knew the subject matter and could teach it to students" (Weitman, 2002). The question that this inadequate definition raises is "How do these qualifications differ from those of a *qualified teacher*?" Teachers graduating from university-based programs are required to take both a subject matter test and on one pedagogy. If both tests are passed, one should be recognized as knowing the subject mater and how to teach it as defined by that state's certification regulations. Are we then saying that passing these tests is worthless and insignificant? If we limit our definitions to what should be expected of *qualified* elementary teachers to the above declaration, then it is no wonder that induction programs abound and putting those individuals with only content knowledge in the field to gain experience is a popular teacher "preparation" model.

Conclusion

All of these factors or issues certainly impact the misguided perceptions of the quality of teachers, especially elementary teachers prepared in highly structured university-based teacher preparation programs. Recent research reveals that how teachers learn to become teachers was *not* determined by:

- State or national regulations or mandates for teacher education programs;
- The availability of alternative portals for subject matter non-education degreed individuals; or
- Experience-based programs, such as PDS models

In fact Kennedy (1999) found that regulation is far less influential in teacher preparation than the pedagogy content provided by *teacher educators* (i.e., those preparing future elementary teachers); 2) alternative portals employed where exceptional liberal arts graduates are inducted into the field provided little change in traditional thought; and 3) experience-based programs, such as PDS models, provided less influence than university-based teacher preparation programs.

Kennedy (1999) also concluded that legislated policies and mandates restrict and reduce university-based teacher preparation programs to mere liberal arts programs with minimal "generic topics such as classroom management (with) subject matter courses taught by the disciplines...hinder teacher learning rather than enabling it" (p.83). Further, this research ascertained that what *teacher educators* taught in *their* college courses was more important than "curriculum duration, number of credit hours, or amount of field experiences" (p. 81)—all mandated by state and/or national guidelines.

Reforming pre-service teacher education programs will falter if reformers focus on: 1) "changing the caliber of people who enter the profession; 2) changing the number of course credits ...required...in one subject or another; and 3) rewards and sanctions that govern teachers" (Kennedy, 1999, p. 56). Yet, all of these are being forced upon not only teacher educators who prepare elementary teachers, but all elementary teachers who raise student achievement in grades three through six. Rewards and sanctions as found in the president's agenda, as well as in many state policies.

In their closing chapter, Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin (1999) noted that "not only does teacher education matter, but *more teacher education* appears to be *better than less*" (, p. 378). Yet, how to convince the public and policy makers that the lack of qualified elementary teachers does not emanate from their preparation through university-based programs is a dilemma to be challenged. The point to be made in this concept paper is to bring the discussion to a conscious level; to provoke the reader; and to advocate and recognize that blame for inadequately prepared elementary teachers who do not know their subject matter *does not* lay with university-based teacher preparation programs. Contrary to popular belief, teacher preparation programs themselves do *positively* impact the quality of it future teachers. The

educational environment as a whole, and systemically, must be responsible for the quality of today's elementary teachers. In all fairness then, the critics of elementary teacher preparation programs must start to unravel the issues discussed in this paper. All of these issues lead unfairly to the misperception that poorly qualified or prepared teachers are the products of SCDs within university-based teacher preparation programs. Those of us involved in the preparation of elementary educators must lead the way...and we must disentangle each of the factors noted above from the mass of criticism geared only towards teacher preparation programs. We must do this one step at a time...one issue at a time. Elementary teacher educators must diminish the misguided reputation that seems to be rising. We *are* preparing qualified elementary teachers in university-based teacher preparation programs. To say otherwise is simply not true.

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