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Kanak: Secondary Teacher Preparation Programs

Secondary Teacher Preparation Programs

by Breanne Kanak

(Education 1100)

cross the United States, research shows that the bar on teacher education programs is being raised. All teachers are expected to take their education to the next level in order to better their students' educational experiences. Secondary education is being transformed to fit the numerous changes occurring in the world: technology, diversity and inclusion/special needs. The importance of relevance in secondary education curriculum and lessons is also emphasized throughout the teacher's education and should continue when the teacher is in the classroom with their own students. The preparation of teachers is no longer only a question of quantity – as in quantity of classes taken - but also in the quality of the education teachers possess before they start teaching in schools.

Though the research available does not suggest any one teacher preparation approach has proven to be the most effective, there has been strong support for student teaching abroad in recent years. Secondary education teachers could benefit immensely from student teaching abroad and exchange programs. As society changes and grows even more diverse, the importance of cultural understanding and expansion of ideas grows just as well. Concerning the effectiveness of these programs, Cwick and Benton of Delta Kappa Gamma say, "Research has shown that international student teaching experiences increase both personal and professional competence in the form of instructional pedagogy, self-learning, and genuine multiculturalism" (39). In a more general sense of the programs, the article also discusses the differences between short-term and long-term exchange programs. Short-term programs usually include more travel throughout the entirety of the trip and focus on the programs as a whole, while long-term programs are usually based in one location for the duration and have more in-depth studies and activities. There is also discussion of the possibility for one-way exchange programs, which is for the more independent and serious of teaching 'candidates'.

"Teacher candidates working in foreign classrooms learn that some aspects of teaching are universal, and these educators are able to take the best practices from their experiences and integrate them into their American-style pedagogy" (39).

By taking this approach to teacher education, pre-service teachers can explore the differences and similarities between homebound and international schools, which will in turn broaden their experiences as people and as teachers.

Often seen as a more cost-effective route to education, community college classes are quickly becoming more involved in curriculum for pre-service secondary education teachers. College of DuPage could be considered one of these institutions for bettering the education of future, and sometimes working, teachers. "In many states, community colleges are no longer playing an informal or tangential role in teacher preparation and instead are becoming critical leaders in efforts to develop a pool of highly effective teachers for states and regions that have demand which far exceeds supply" (Coulter, Vandal 1, paragraph 1). There are four categories of teacher preparation involving community colleges: 2+2 programs, professional development programs, alternative certification programs for post-baccalaureate students, and community college baccalaureate programs. 2+2 programs are the most common method for teacher preparation at community colleges. Core general education courses are offered to students who may be planning to transfer to a baccalaureate granting

institution (6). This highlights the issue of relevance in the classrooms –the classes are relevant to the changes in education and teaching, tying in professional development programs that include learning skills and technology utilized by teachers. Students that take part in this program are usually required to choose both their community college and their four-year transfer school of choice in advance. This method also ensures most classes will transfer between the two schools; a common problem faced by students who choose to transfer from one school to another.

The second category of community college teacher preparation is alternative certification. This approach can be difficult, because "...community college programs may only provide coursework on a non-credit basis and, as a result, not provide progress towards a master's degree or any other advanced credential...most students enrolled in community college alternate certification programs are not able to earn graduate-level credit" (6). For this reason, the credibility of many of the schools offering these programs is in question. Another option for community college teacher education is a baccalaureate program. This program is rather controversial but can be very helpful to regions that have a shortage of teachers in certain subjects and sometimes a shortage of teachers in general (7). Much like the courses offered at the College of DuPage for beginning teacher education, these programs offer classes that are based on research, theory, and practice. "Most community colleges add the baccalaureate option after a careful analysis which determines whether the program will meet a critical need in the community of state in which the institution resides" (7). Community college baccalaureate programs are often in place when the neighboring universities do not have four-year programs for education, when there are no neighboring higher education institutions, or when there is a need for a less expensive educational route.

Teacher preparation or the lack thereof, is an issue that is constantly addressed, but rarely remedied. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan spoke in 2009 about the teacher education systems in the United States:

"He (Duncan) called on programs to continue their improvement, saying most have not kept pace with a now decade-long focus on student outcomes...he also said they are doing a 'mediocre job' of preparing teachers for the realities of the profession" (Sawchuck 1).

The fact that Duncan had to address this after the numerous educational process changes that occurred in the years preceding is disheartening. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 should have pushed educators to work harder and strive for higher test scores and performances from their students. Instead, many educators find NCLB to be more of a challenge than they are willing to take on. If teachers are not given the education that helps them teach others, their students suffer immensely. Teacher preparation programs, according to Duncan, "...should include a stronger preservice fieldwork component, a focus on subject-matter competency and classroom-management techniques, and state action to gauge the success of teacher college graduates in classrooms" (2). Though this statement is not grade-level specific, these words can easily be applied to Secondary education classrooms. Secondary education is suffering because of the lack of properly prepared teachers.

When talking about teacher preparation programs, subject knowledge, field experience, effectiveness and accreditation are all issues that come to mind. The Education Commission of the States conducted a study that explored "Eight Questions on Teacher Preparation". One of the questions in the study was concerning subject knowledge. When enrolled in a school of education, depending on the grade level chosen, most teaching candidates are encouraged to pursue many classes in the subject they wish to teach. However, the study shows "there may be a point after which additional courses are of minimal value.." and "Ultimately, the question is not how many courses are important, or even whether a major is important, but which courses have an appreciable impact on a

teacher's ability to teach specific subjects" (Allen 4). In Secondary teacher preparation, teaching candidates are required to have a major in their subject.

Another issue that frequently arises is field experiences for teaching candidates. There will always be the argument for or against more or less experience, but in reality the teachers of tomorrow need as much experience as they can acquire. High-quality field experience, when linked to teacher effectiveness, has two common characteristics. "(Allen 1) The first characteristic is strong supervision by well-trained teachers and university faculty"(6), meaning high quality teachers should, logically, learn more and are more effective if they are taught by better teachers themselves. The second characteristic is "prospective teachers' solid grasp of subject matter and basic understanding of pedagogy prior to student teaching" (6), meaning teachers need to be well-educated in what they want to teach as well as how to teach.

There are also movements to make sure teachers are trained effectively in urban, low-performing, or struggling schools. Three strategies that are often associated with teacher preparation programs in urban areas are: field placement in urban schools, training in multicultural awareness, and effective recruitment and screening of teacher candidates (Allen 8). Teachers should be distributed to these high-need schools after many years of preparation, class experience, and professional development.

Accreditation of teacher preparation institutions was also an issue addressed in the study. Though there have been very few studies on the subject, "what little research there is seems to suggest that accreditation of a teacher education program by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) may increase the number of program graduates who become fully certified to teach" (Allen 9). Teacher candidates are like any other pre-professionals who attend college; they want the best of the best. NCATE accredited schools are sought after and assumed to be highly effective. A teacher candidate in any field will most likely stay in preparation programs if they respect and are engaged in the education they receive.

Relevance in teacher education refers to clinical experiences to train teacher candidates. The new programs were "...encouraging institutions to place teacher candidates in more robust clinical experiences, and wrap coursework around practice" (Cibulka 2). Many new teacher education programs highly support increased time spent in classroom environments, stronger preparation in assessment, and year-long residencies in candidates' senior year of college (3). Partnerships between schools and school districts are also very important in communicating needs and trends in education, i.e.: school organization, learning environments, community and family engagement, etc. (4). NCATE's increased requirements for teacher preparation programs, while innovative, should not be very surprising to read. Many of these regulations are governed by common sense such as teachers learn better if they themselves have effective teachers. Also, increased classroom experience is beneficial to teacher candidates, as is keeping connected to school districts and practices. Though this amount of reform is rather intimidating the wheels are in motion. Teachers are very slowly beginning to become educated more effectively.

The last, and arguably most important, issues in teacher education are increasing relevance, quality and performance in preparation programs. In 2009, the NCATE released new ideas and approaches for improving teacher preparation programs. These approaches were put into place to "help educator preparation programs attain excellence and meet urgent national needs" (Cibulka 2). Reflecting upon the educational needs of the nation, "...NCATE expects institutions to either demonstrate continuous improvement toward excellence or complete a challenging transformation initiative" (2). High schools are expected to implement these regulations now, but each school reacts differently. 'Improvement toward excellence' should apply to all grade levels and to all facets of the educational system. Secondary teachers need to push their students harder in school and encourage active learning – this process can be encouraged by thorough teacher preparation and motivation before entering the classroom.

A well-educated and experienced teacher will bring more to a classroom than a teacher with little preparation in their field. Many education programs are available for people interested in becoming Secondary education teachers. Teaching abroad, community college class offerings, resident teaching programs and the traditional 4-year university teaching college approach are just a few choices for teacher candidates. The amount of choice in teacher preparation programs is a relatively new phenomenon, but the institutions themselves are growing in number and reputation. Secondary education teachers need to be able to nurture their students' ambitions and aspirations for their futures through their teaching, and the foundation for an effective teacher is receiving the best teacher education.

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