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## Elementary-Teacher Preparation Programs

by Jennifer Wendt

(Education 1100)

While to some degree teaching can be a natural talent, students who seek one day to be a teacher must have some sort of preparation and education before they enter their own classroom. Education major students are introduced to the ideas, theories and practical application as well as direct practice and observation in the classroom through teacher preparation courses that one must complete in order to eventually become a teacher. These programs may vary depending on the ultimate goal of the student – be it to teach preschool levels, elementary, or secondary school, in addition to the style of the program itself. My goal in this paper is to discover what sort of preparation programs a student goes through in order to teach at the elementary school level, to understand how and if these programs work, and how they are evolving. Most teacher preparation programs are divided between the college-setting (learning theory, history, and information), and the field setting (actually observing and teaching students). However, this is by no means the only way to organize a teacher preparation program. Some alternative programs, such as Teach for America, focus on having students learning directly from being in a classroom. There are also many different types of programs available, and some are more effective than others. Teacher Education, once a subject that was rather overlooked in colleges, is now in the spotlight, in part due to the Obama administration's plans to change the No Child Left Behind Act. In the past ten years, groups like NCATE, or the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education have been encouraging the teaching community to redesign teacher preparation programs because new teachers were failing to be fully prepared for their first year in the classroom. It has also been said that reoccurring problem in traditional college and university teaching education programs is that there is a “lack of connection between campus-based, university-based teacher education courses and field experiences” (Zeichner, 2010, para 11). On the other side of the coin, educator preparation programs that – as mentioned previously – combine both college settings and field settings, have been shown to have higher success and preparation rates. The field of educating prospective students to become teachers has come a long way from preparing students not much older or more educated than their future pupils – as was the case in the 1900s – and is still studying and experimenting to see what programs will best prepare aspiring teachers, transforming them from student to teacher. With the recent flood of studies and debates conducted about teacher preparation programs, it seems that the field of education is still learning itself.

The simplest way to explain how aspiring teachers prepare for their own classroom, and in general, what teacher preparation programs *are* is that “there is no consensus on how to best prepare teachers” (Sadker & Zittleman, 2010, p.15). There are many different programs to prepare students to take on the role as teachers, but the two biggest approaches are known as “traditional” and “alternative.” Traditional programs are what most education major students go through at a college or university. This course has students learn the theory behind teaching, then go to a separate classroom in a local school to actually practice teaching and apply what they have learned. From there on, students may get a bachelor's degree or master's degree in teaching, or continue their student teaching for an additional year to obtain their teacher's license. Traditional programs are beneficial because they give a prospective teacher a hefty knowledge of the history of teaching, how children learn, and various methods and theories of education. Most prospective teachers graduate from this sort of program, and traditional programs actually *graduate* more of their students than

their counterpart, alternative programs (Sadker & Zittman, 2010, p.15). Alternative programs are more akin to apprenticeships a mechanic or electrician might go through. Rather than learn theory in a course, in these alternative-program students are expected to learn how to teach within a working classroom, a sort of direct approach. Support for this approach comes from the idea that traditional programs are too theory-heavy and do not place enough importance upon the experience of student-teaching. One program like this is called Teach for America, which “tend to attract students who majored in other subjects and train them in only a few months, providing an alternative method of certification” (Nelson, 2010, para 13). Alternative programs are beneficial to students because they give them a chance to dive into the world of teaching, to learn directly from on-the-job-experience and to see if this really is the career for them. Neither the traditional, nor alternative approach to teacher preparation is acknowledged to be better than the other, as they both draw supporters and critics. While each program provides beneficial experiences and lessons for their students, they also have their individual drawbacks and weaknesses.

While there has been a critical view placed on teacher preparation programs within the past ten years, with the No Child Left Behind Act's renewal looming above the world of education, there have been a massive increase in studies and debates over teacher education programs, as to whether or not they really are effective in adequately preparing and educating aspiring teachers. Both traditional and alternative paths of teacher education such as college universities and Teach For America have caught their fair share of criticism. Traditional universities, whose focuses are to teach pedagogical methods and theory while requiring prospective teachers student teach and observe at separate school facilities, have been accused of having a major disconnect between its campus-based and teaching-based components. Zeichner (2010) explains the common downfall of traditional programs:

Although most university-based teacher education programs now include multiple field experiences over the length of the program and often situate field experiences in some type of school-university partnership, the disconnect between what students are taught in campus courses and their opportunities for learning to enact these practices in their school placements is often very great even within professional development and partner schools. For example, it is very common for cooperating teachers with whom students work during their field placement to know very little about the specifics of the methods and foundation courses that their student teachers have completed on campus, and the people teaching the campus courses often know very little about the specific practices used in the [K-6] classrooms where their students are placed. (para 11-12)

The result of this phenomena is that students do not have opportunities to apply what they have learned in their campus course and get feedback on their use of those teaching methods. There occurs, for lack of a better word, a disconnect between what was intended to work dually. The college campus and the classroom become two separate worlds to the student. Therefore, what they are learning in the college course does not really carry over to their teaching career and students, now teachers, feel ill-prepared to teach their own classroom. “With the exception of a few assignments in methods courses that students are asked to complete in their field placements, student teachers and their cooperating teachers are often left to work out the daily business of student teaching by themselves with little guidance and connection to campus courses, and it is often incorrectly assumed that good teaching practices are caught rather than taught,” concludes one researcher (Zeichner, 2010, para 12-13). Alternative programs do not fare better than their traditional program counterparts. Alternative programs such as Teach for America and city-based teaching programs have been accused of inadequately preparing teachers because they leave out important pedagogical

methods. Beverly L. Young, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Teacher Education and Public-School Programs at California State University, says (as quoted by Nelson, 2010), “[Alternative certification can have] very minimum qualifications. Teachers who are trained that way can easily become frustrated and leave the profession.” While alternative programs are fast and offer a lot of in-classroom experience, they denote the importance of an understanding for the history of education, as well as important theories and methods of education. Young even says “Programs like Teach for America that focus on subject matter and not pedagogy really shortchange the teaching profession” (as quoted in Nelson, 2010). In actuality, Greenwell’s article has found that the majority of participants in Teach for America leave teaching after just two years (as cited in Sadker & Zittleman, 2010). From these accounts, it is clear that each teacher preparation path is not perfect, and can stand for improvement to better prepare aspiring teachers to feel secure and knowledgeable in their first years in teaching.

Luckily, the field of teacher education is, in a way, benefiting from the harsh critiques of the local, government, and education communities. “A profound sea of change is becoming apparent. The relatively small waves of intrusion that lapped on the shores of academe are becoming white-capped breakers,” says one writer (Goodlad, 1999, para 14). Debates are bringing about ideas for better methods of, well, teaching teaching, and various teacher education programs across the country are overhauling their programs to start programs better attuned to prospective teacher’s needs and what research has showed us is effective. In Arizona State, for example, education majors are taking less education courses, and more classes on the field they intend to teach. Interestingly enough, “the law school dean is writing a civics curriculum for aspiring elementary school teachers; university scientists have created a science program. It’s a university-wide effort to make teacher training more vigorous and effective” (Nelson, 2010, para 1). With a renewed interest in making their teacher preparation programs count by getting the entire university involved, the University of Arizona is bringing in more education-major students and, hopefully, will have a higher success rate. As Zeichner (2010) states that:

Two of the most in-depth national studies (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Tatto, 1996) of teacher education in the United States have shown that carefully constructed field experiences that are coordinated with campus courses are more influential and effective in supporting student teaching learning than the unguided and disconnected field experiences that have historically been dominant in American teacher education.

Fourteen years later, it seems America is finally listening, and working on developing the connection between campus and the classroom. In part, this change is thanks to the upcoming renewal of the No Child Left Behind act, and the changes the Obama administration is bringing. Mr. Obama has “expressed interest in reforming traditional teachers’ colleges” (Nelson, 2010, para 12) and issued grants to reward colleges of education that use a combination of traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs aspects. The University of Arizona is one of the first universities to change, and receive that grant. Now, teachers and universities have opened small laboratory schools where different teaching methods can be taught and practiced, to model what students can do when they are really in an elementary classroom. At the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the resident teachers have created a stronger link between the campus and the classroom by hiring [K-6] educators with “evidence of a high level of competence in the classroom” (Zeichner, 2010) to spend two years working in all aspects of a teacher education program. During this two year time period, the public school teachers participate in seminars to improve teacher leadership skills, and after the two year residency, go back to their public schools. “I had a chance to interview several university faculty and teacher residents during the 2 years that I recently spend as the external evaluator for the UW-Milwaukee Teachers for a New Era project, and...the faculty I whom I interviewed spoke very

positively,” said Zeichner. With bringing in elementary teachers, students also have a chance to see the “artifacts of teaching” (Zeichner, 2010, para 20) from a teacher's work at elementary schools, such as tests, projects, or even videos displaying different teaching methods. These video clips are especially promising, because they give students a chance to see *how* they can incorporate pedagogical methods into classroom teaching. Co-teaching, also known as collaborative teaching, something that is common in elementary classrooms and usually involves general and special education professionals collaborating in the same classroom for better results, is something that will also be practiced in student teaching. Murawski (2002) explains:

Few teacher preparation programs provide instruction in co-teaching, and far fewer actually model the techniques for teacher trainees. Hence, it's not surprising that new teachers often feel unprepared to co-teach...[Yet] when two credentialed (or at least experienced teachers are collaborating together in one classroom, great things can happen. Few teachers can deny that.

So, by introducing student teachers to this method of teaching early, they ensure that they will be comfortable with a technique that can truly help their students do exponentially better than they would with just one teacher. Alternative programs are also being redesigned-program officials are examining Teach for America's recruiting and selecting strategies as well as making getting certification more challenging. Teach for America will “require education students to take more classes in the liberal arts and sciences, extend student teaching to a year-long teaching from a semester-long one, and create teacher-residency programs at elementary schools around the state...including some on American Indian reserves” (Nelson, 2010, para 17). Through more carefully coordinated field experiences that can tie into campus coursework, and creative, supportive mentors; students in traditional programs will lose the “disconnect effect” that has plagued traditional teacher preparation programs in the past. And through increasing course requirements and student-teaching hours, alternative program students will be fully educated and effective. With this mass redesign of teacher preparation programs, both types of students have a better chance accomplishing the ultimate goal of teacher education: to prepare teachers for their own classroom.

Teacher preparations programs have come a long way since the 1800s, and are evolving increasingly fast today. As people in the field of education researched and realized that neither the traditional nor the alternative preparation programs were a perfect path for aspiring teachers to walk on, they brainstormed new ideas and debated to combine the aspects of both programs into a more accommodating one. While the traditional path exercises a sort of transmission of culture – the passing on of pedagogical methods and theories that have served teachers for generations – it fails to show how to use this knowledge in the classroom, and while alternative programs give teachers a look into the world they may one day inhabit, they fail to really give them the right tools to succeed. Now, educators as well as the government are working to create a synthesis of the two programs, a plan that will give prospective teachers the important theories and methods of teaching while showing them how they can apply the things they have learned from their courses *in* the classroom and making sure students get adequate time to actually experience teaching. The goal of teacher preparation programs is to make our future teachers feel comfortable, confident, and prepared to take on the role of educating our future-no simple task. As Goodlaw (1999) states, “Now the time has come-it is long overdue-to launch an era of concentrated attention to teacher education. The reasons are both practical and moral: practical because the university's very standing is at stake; moral because it's the *right* thing to do.”

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