

Preparing Better Teachers by Improving the Student Teaching Semester

Linda Katz and Cameron Voss 01 April 2011

Introduction

In *Blueprint: Teaching Quality*, the University of Pennsylvania Center for High Impact Philanthropy argues that “the issue is poor management of human capital in education—from recruitment through to retention. ... settling for any teaching candidate who shows interest, training them poorly, deploying them unevenly, failing to support them adequately once they arrive at a school, providing a work environment that is not conducive to teacher or student learning, and evaluating and compensating them in a way that fails to recognize weak or strong performers” (Center for High Impact Philanthropy 2010).

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said that “many, if not most, of the nation’s 1,450 schools, colleges and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st-century classroom” (quoted in Foderaro 2010).

Student teaching has been recognized by decades of research as the most influential component of teacher

preparation (Lortie 1975, Berry et al. 2008). The quality of the field experience is strongly correlated with new teacher performance in their own classrooms and even future teacher behavior. Moreover, most teachers rank student teaching as the greatest lasting factor in shaping their teaching (Guyton and McIntyre 1990, Hamman et al. 2009).

The Problem: Inadequate Teacher Preparation

Student teaching, though widely recognized as the most influential aspect of teacher preparation, is beset by numerous problems repeatedly cited by scholars and educators (Levine 2006, Zeichner 2002). Field placements are decided haphazardly (Darling-Hammond 2006), with the selection of classrooms for student teachers often based on convenience or availability, rather than evidence of instructional effectiveness. Teacher candidates are not necessarily exposed to best practices or provided with high-quality supervision. In urban settings—where high turnover, inexperience and poor professional development are the norm—student teachers often learn more about how not to teach (Dowhower 1990, Levine 2006: 63).

Universities place student teachers with no metrics to decide which classrooms they should enter. How is it decided that a particular teacher should be a “cooperating teacher”? Few programs review that teacher’s

instructional skills or student outcomes, or train the cooperating teacher to be an effective coach and mentor. We need state-certified cooperating teachers who earn extra pay for this certification. They should meet the highest levels of student-outcome measures and provide evidence of excellent instruction, such as through Robert C. Pianta's [Classroom Assessment Scoring System](#).

Students pay full tuition for their student-teaching semester, despite its low cost to the school of education. Field supervisors are paid very little; likewise, cooperating teachers receive limited financial rewards or training. Clinical training could be the best place in the training pipeline to develop crucial teaching skills and to weed out would-be teachers who can't succeed in the classroom. Yet teacher trainees too often receive a mediocre student teaching experience and an almost automatic passing grade. The obvious contrast is the medical profession, where clinical training is about the very best practices possible.

We suggest that universities and professional development organizations can work together to better prepare aspiring teachers. If all student teachers learned their craft from exemplary teachers, we would no longer have undertrained and underperforming teachers in the classroom

The Innovation: Model Classroom Teachers

The Innovation: Model Classroom Teachers

Teacher preparation would be dramatically better if universities placed student teachers in top-quality classrooms for their student teaching clinical experience. For example, Children's Literacy Initiative develops Model Classroom teachers, who attend professional development seminars and receive approximately 90 hours of one-on-one coaching to hone their literacy instructional skills. Their classrooms are stocked with quality children's literature and are organized around student learning. The teachers attend monthly Model Classroom Network meetings where they share insights and learn from each other. Model Classroom teachers are recognized as teacher leaders in their schools and districts, and other teachers observe their lessons.

Model Classrooms are ideal student teacher placement sites, as Children's Literacy Initiative demonstrated last year in a pilot program in Philadelphia that paired seven student teachers from five local universities with Model Classroom teachers who served as their cooperating teachers. The Model Classroom teachers attended a "coaching camp" to learn to effectively mentor student teachers. The student teachers attended an Institute prior to student teaching to ground them in the research-based effective literacy practices they would see and use in the classroom.

A CLI Professional Developer coached the student teachers in their classroom, focusing in particular on administering running records, an assessment tool that determines students' reading levels, strengths and needs. The student teachers attended a seminar to learn how to calculate the results, analyze the data and use the data to inform instruction. During the semester, student teachers practiced running records with children, and were guided by their CLI Professional Developer.

Running records are an example of a key assessment practice that we initially expected teachers would learn in a university setting, but more than half of the student teachers were unfamiliar with running records prior to CLI training. Because we found it to be relatively uncommon for them to have the opportunity to learn about and practice taking running records, we added it to the emphasis of this project. The Professional Developer and student teachers reported large increases in their skill and confidence in conducting these assessments from the beginning to the end of the project.

The student teachers involved in the project expressed how important the quality of their student teacher placement was to their level of preparation to teach, and their motivation to teach in an urban setting. One student teacher commented, "I never would have considering teaching in an urban elementary school. I grew up in the suburbs, and had a lot of negative fieldwork placements in my undergraduate career in urban schools."

This project confirmed our belief that training and coaching is very valuable for student teachers. Our university contacts, and the student teachers themselves, recognized that student teacher placements in Model Classrooms were superior to the average placement.

Scaling and Replication

Scaling and Replication

CLI recently was awarded a Validation Grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Investing in Innovation (i3) program. This multi-year funding will allow us to develop Model Classrooms in kindergarten through third grade in 39 schools in Philadelphia, Camden, Newark and Chicago. Increasing the number of Model Classrooms is a first step that can be leveraged to lead to more high-quality student teacher placements in these cities.

To further scale up the work, we suggest that universities replicate the project we piloted, seeking out exemplary classrooms for their student teacher placements. CLI and other professional development organizations could serve as technical assistance providers to universities as they make these adjustments to their teacher preparation programs.

Universities should look for student teacher placements in classrooms where the teacher has been objectively validated as expert. We envision a new career pathway

whereby teachers would be required to attain state certification (similar to National Board Certification, but easier and less costly) to serve as cooperating teachers. This process would entail demonstration of teaching mastery via a research-based evaluation protocol, and achievement of the credential would afford the teacher enhanced status and financial compensation. This vision is aligned with the current focus of many states and school districts on developing meaningful teacher evaluation systems and an expanded career ladder, as well as developing training and support for beginning teachers that lead to both effective instruction and retention in high-needs, urban schools.

Linda Katz is the co-founder and Executive Director of Children's Literacy Initiative. Before founding CLI in 1988, Linda created and co-produced the children's book and music event Children's Expo at the Philadelphia Civic Center, co-produced with ABC Radio Networks, (1989–1993) the series Mrs. Bush's Story Hour, was founder and President of Rainbow Readers, Inc. (1982–1985), and was Head Librarian at Wolfsohn Memorial Library (1971–1980). She holds a BA in English Literature from the University of Pennsylvania, an MS in Library Science from Drexel University, and an MBA from the Wharton Graduate School of Business, University of Pennsylvania.

Cameron Voss is the Deputy Director of Children's

Literacy Initiative. She came to CLI in 2000 to manage the organization's program evaluation and reporting. Previously, she was the Director of Development at Frankford Group Ministry (1996–2000), a Research Assistant at Research for Action (1995–1996), and an adult literacy and GED teacher at two community-based organizations in Philadelphia, The Lighthouse and Lutheran Settlement House (1991–1995). She holds a BA in Political Science from Swarthmore College and an MA in Urban Studies from Temple University.

References

References

Berry, B., et al. (2008). *Creating and Sustaining Urban Teacher Residencies: A New Way to Recruit, Prepare, and Retain Effective Teachers in High-Needs Districts*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Center for Teaching Quality.

Center for High Impact Philanthropy, University of Pennsylvania. (2010, Spring). High impact philanthropy to improve teaching quality in the U.S. *Blueprint: Teaching Quality*. Available at [http://www.impact.upenn.edu/images/uploads/UPenn_CHIP_TQProjectBlueprint_Mar10\(1\).pdf](http://www.impact.upenn.edu/images/uploads/UPenn_CHIP_TQProjectBlueprint_Mar10(1).pdf).

Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). Constructing 21st-century teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57(3).

Dowhower, S. (1990). Students' perceptions of early field experiences in reading. *Yearbook of the American Reading Forum*, 10.

Foderaro, L. (2010). Alternate path for teachers gains ground. *New York Times*, April 18.

Guyton, E., and D. J. McIntyre. (1990). Student teaching and school experiences. In W. R. Houston (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*. New York: Macmillan.

Hamman, D., A. Olivarez, K. Button, and R. Griffith. (2009). "I'm prepared for anything now": Student teacher and cooperating teacher interaction as a critical factor in determining the preparation of "quality" elementary reading teachers. *The Teacher Educator*, 44(1).

Levine, A. (2006). *Educating School Teachers*. Washington, D.C.: Education Schools Project.

Lortie, D. (1975). *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zeichner, K. (2002). Beyond traditional structures of student teaching. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 29(2).