

A Call for Reformation of Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States

Ashley Ireland Dann

University of Virginia

September 23, 2014

Abstract

Although current research, educational theorists, and international comparison prove a need for reform, the United States' teacher preparation programs are failing. The following paper will call for the reform of teacher preparation programs in three distinct areas. Examination of current data, application of educational theorists' perspectives and comparative analysis of international practices, will prove the need for reform in teacher preparation program recruitment practices, curriculum, and support systems.

Key Words: Teacher Preparation, Education Policy, International Comparison

As the United States continues to work to perfect its education system, U.S. policy continues to fundamentally ignore the one thing that has been shown to make the largest difference in student achievement- teachers. Although the reforms originally established by the *No Child Left Behind Act* and further encouraged by the *Race to the Top* fund, address low-quality teachers through comprehensive teacher evaluations, these reforms fail to adequately address the source of that problem. There are currently no established national standards for state teacher preparation programs and subsequently, the preparation and quality of the national pool of teachers varies greatly by state and region (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014). As teacher quality has repeatedly been proven to be the most critical in-school factor influencing student achievement (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Stigler & Hiebert, 1999; Rice, 2003; Rockoff, 2004; Baker & LeTendre, 2005, Darling-Hammond, 2010), it is essential that the quality of teacher preparation programs be addressed. In order to improve the United States' international education rankings and increase the achievement of the nation's students, current teacher preparation programs must be reformed. The following paper will demonstrate a need for the reformation of teacher preparation programs in three distinct areas through analysis of current data, application of educational theory and international comparison.

In 2014, a study conducted by the National Council on Teacher Quality found that over 50% of the nation's teacher preparation programs were failing to adequately prepare elementary and secondary teachers for the classroom (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014). The comprehensive study of over 1,600 teacher preparation programs found three major flaws in the majority of programs. The study revealed that the "programs typically have very low admission standards, do not ensure that candidates are prepared to teach

every subject they could be assigned, and prove insufficient to support candidates as they take on full-time teaching responsibilities” (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014, p. 2).

These three fundamental flaws of poor recruitment practices, inadequate curriculum and insufficient support systems are echoed through research data and educational theory and can be juxtaposed with the more effective practices of nations higher ranked on international assessments.

Recruitment practices for teacher preparation programs in the United States are neither competitive nor adequately selective. According to the *2012 State Teacher Policy Yearbook*, the United States is “far off the mark when it comes to fostering teacher effectiveness out of the gate” (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2012, p.4), citing that 49 of the 50 states and the District of Columbia are failing when it comes to recruiting quality candidates into preparation programs. In addition, the council found that only 24 states require basic skills be assessed before admission to teacher preparation programs (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2012). When assessing the 24 states that did utilize admissions tests, the council found those tests to be fundamentally and

“...inherently flawed. For example, the tests used by every state except Texas are normed only to the prospective teacher population rather than to the general college-bound population. This sets a lower expectation for students entering teacher preparation programs than for other students at colleges and universities.” (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2012, p.6).

Coupled with these poor testing requirements is further poor selection criterion, as only 18% of teacher preparation programs require a minimum 3.0 grade point average (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014). Beyond the minimum 3.0 grade point average, only 6% of undergraduate and 5% of graduate teacher preparation programs likely draw “almost all candidates from the top half of students” (Greenberg, Walsh, McKee, 2014, p.

35). This lack of competitive teacher program recruitment practices results in lower quality candidates and subsequently lower quality teachers.

Educational theorists have written about the need for a higher quality pool of teacher applicants for decades. In 1934, authors A.S. Barr and Lois Douglas argued for a more selective process in choosing teachers for training. The authors argued for “policies and practices as will insure selection and retention of students likely to succeed in the teaching profession” (Barr & Douglas, 1934, p. 92). The authors further argued for the requirement of “high pre-professional qualifications and accomplishments” (p. 93) including high scores on aptitude, intelligence testing and college entrance exams as well as demanding the applicant be in the “upper 50 percentile of his graduating class” (Barr & Douglas, 1934, p. 96). This call for raised admission standards was made again by the 1986 Carnegie publication, *A Nation Prepared: Teaching for the 21st Century*, which stated that “raising the standard for entry into the profession is likely to give the public confidence” (as quoted in Mehta, 2013, p. 132). Authors Jal Mehta and Joe Doctor (2013) agree, recommending, “raising the bar for entry” (p. 8) and the development of a “rigorous, performance-based exam” (p.8) for admittance into the teaching profession. The National Council on Teacher Quality who calls for states to raise their standards for teacher preparation program admittance shares these recommendations. Analogous with Barr and Douglas, and Mehta and Doctor, the council recommends that programs draw from the top half of the college going population, require above average scores on SAT or ACT exams and a recommend a requirement of a 3.0 GPA. Although multiple theorists and authors have called for these improvements, teacher preparation programs continue to have low recruitment standards of practice.

In contrast, teacher preparation programs in high-achieving nations such as Finland, Singapore and South Korea have extremely rigorous, comprehensive and highly selective recruitment practices (Wei, Andree & Darling-Hammond, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010). According to Sahlberg (2010), Finland's education programs attract approximately 20,000 applicants annually, of which only the top 25% are selected. Viable candidates must possess high academic records, exceptional interpersonal skills and must display a "deep commitment to teaching" (Sahlberg, 2010, p.3). Finland's selective recruitment process results in a higher quality teaching pool; the process may also add to the positive national regard of Finnish teachers and is often credited as a major contributor to the country's high achievement on international assessments. The high recruitment standards of nations such as those in Finland, and others in Singapore and South Korea have led to "a uniformly well-prepared teaching force..." (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 199) where "slots in teaching programs are highly coveted in these nations and shortages are extremely rare" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 199). It is clear that the United States must reform the recruitment practices of its teacher preparation programs in order to remain internationally competitive.

American teacher preparation programs also lack a standardized curriculum at the primary and secondary level. The lack of a universal, standardized, professional body-of-knowledge established in teacher preparation programs has resulted in a fragmented, restricted and inadequate knowledge base for the teaching profession. For teachers of primary grades, the absence of comprehensive curriculum results in teachers who lack expertise in effective reading and mathematics instruction, and have deficiencies in other elementary content (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014). A 2014 study on teacher

preparation in reading instruction found a tremendous amount of variability. The study found that over “962 different text books used in 2,671 courses, most of which convey a plethora of non-research based approaches to reading” (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014, p. 37), with only 17% of programs containing adequate instruction on effective reading practices. For mathematics instruction, the data is further substandard, with only 2% of graduate teacher programs containing any coursework in mathematics instruction (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014). For elementary content, a full 89% of teacher preparation programs cover only part or do not cover any of the elementary curriculum to be taught by the teachers (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee). The lack of curriculum in teacher preparation programs also causes major gaps for secondary teachers’ knowledge. Currently only 37% of undergraduate and 31% of graduate teacher preparation programs for high school teachers have program coursework “requirements that ensures that all high school candidates have content knowledge in the subjects they will teach” (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014, p. 42). The lack of curricular standards also results in teachers at both the elementary and secondary levels being ill prepared to teach English Language Learner students. The National Council on Teacher Quality found that a full 76% of teacher preparation programs contain zero strategies for teaching English Language Learner students (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014). Similarly, the study found teacher programs did not adequately prepare candidates to teach content to students with special needs, struggling readers, and those requiring special education services (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014). The lack of professional knowledge base instituted at the pre-service level, dramatically effects the teaching profession, resulting in the

utilization of inconsistent teaching methods and ultimately poorer quality of teachers throughout the nation's schools.

Many educational theorists share this concern about the lack of unified teacher preparation curriculum and shared professional knowledge. Echoing the findings of underprepared teachers by the National Council on Teacher Quality, authors William Schmidt and Curtis McKnight found that teachers themselves felt unprepared to teach the content they were assigned. When examining teachers of math content in their book *Inequality for All*, Schmidt and McKnight found, "that only about half of the teachers felt academically well prepared to teach" (2012, p. 156). The authors concluded that this lack of fundamental teacher preparation was a key factor in the United States' poor rankings on international assessments and a major contributor to the achievement gap for students of low socio-economic status. Similarly, author Jal Mehta (2013) claims that the inability of teachers to establish and share a "defined body of knowledge considered essential to becoming a teacher" (p. 123) and prepare new teachers with a shared set of standards of practice is a major cause of the professions' troubles. The 1986 Carnegie report described the lack of preparation and existence of universal professional knowledge:

"Virtually every occupation regarded by the public as a true profession has codified the knowledge, the specific expertise, required by its practitioners, and has required that those who wish to practice the profession... demonstrate that they have a command of the needed knowledge and the ability to apply it... They capture that knowledge in an assessment or examination and administer that examination to people who want a certificate saying they passed the assessment" (as quoted in Mehta, 2013, p. 133).

Although this report was written almost thirty years ago, there is still no national unified body of knowledge or standards for the teaching profession in place for teacher preparation programs and the profession continues to suffer because of it.

In contrast, high achieving nations such as Finland and Korea have a unified and established body of knowledge that acts as the curricular guide for teacher preparation programs. Finnish teacher education programs have a standardized national curriculum that contains practical application, pedagogical theory, and research based teaching practice (Sahlberg, 2012). The course work includes undergraduate and graduate level classes, and covers topics in subject didactics, research methodology, developmental psychology, special education, and social, historical and philosophical foundations of education (Sahlberg, 2010). When Finnish teachers leave their preparation program they possess a codified and standardized body of knowledge shared by all professionals in their field. Similarly, Korea's teachers are highly qualified, "100% of them have completed teacher education and a set of written and performance tests to attain certification" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 179). All Korean teachers are instructed in "a standard program of studies in content and pedagogy" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 179). This rigorous and standardized knowledge base, works to earn Korean teachers a high level of respect within their society (Darling-Hammond, 2010). If U.S. teacher preparation programs had a national set of professional standards akin to Finland and Korea, the resulting universal body of knowledge for teachers would work to professionalize teaching, drastically improve the teacher pool, and ultimately lead to higher student achievement.

American teacher preparation programs also do not provide adequate supports for teachers taking on classroom and teaching responsibilities. This lack of support includes deficits in practical application or student teaching, and mentoring, as well as a lack of guidance in effective classroom management, lesson planning, and effective use of student data. In terms of practical application requirements, the National Council on Teacher Quality (2012), found only twenty-eight states requiring teaching candidates to have a 10-week teaching experience with a mentor teacher. Additionally, only three of those states— Florida, Indiana and Tennessee require that the cooperating mentor teacher be a proven quality teacher. The council’s 2014 report found a full 59% of programs had absolutely no policy in place that insured a student teacher had any degree of support from a mentor, cooperating teacher or other staff member (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014). The 2014 report also found that 37% of teacher preparation programs required little or no feedback on classroom management techniques, 57% offered no support with lesson planning, and only 24% adequately addressed assessment and data utilization topics (Greenberg, Walsh & McKee, 2014). These drastic and dismal figures further prove the need for national reform.

The dismal state of teacher preparation program supports is resonated by contemporary educational theorists. Linda Darling-Hammond (2010) called for an overhaul of teacher preparation and mentoring programs in her seminal work, *The Flat World and Education*. She recommended that all pre-service teachers complete “extensive clinical training as well as course work” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 198) in a three or four year universal high-quality teacher education program. Darling-Hammond also called for high quality mentors for all new teachers “coupled with reduced teaching

load and shared planning time” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 198). These supportive changes, together with ongoing teacher-led professional learning would work to positively affect the teaching profession. Similarly, authors James Stigler and James Hiebert (1999) argued for educational structures and systems that would allow teachers to learn from each other and provide shared support. Although these well-known educational theorists understand the power of practical application, teacher-led supports, mentoring, and collaboration, the nation’s teacher preparation programs continue to lack these basic tenants.

By contrast, international teacher preparation programs offer a wealth of support to their pre-service and new teachers (Wei, Andree & Darling-Hammond, 2009).

Countries such as Finland require high amounts of practical application. The Finnish programs include three full terms of practicum work where the student teachers work in teacher training schools or field schools. While working as student teachers,

“Students observe lessons by experienced teachers, practice teaching observed by supervisory teachers, and deliver independent lessons to different groups of pupils while being evaluated by supervising teachers and Department of Teacher Education professors and lecturers” (Sahlberg, 2010, p 4).

New Zealand and many countries in Asia provide similar supports through quality mentoring programs and supportive systems. These countries “fund 20% release time for new teachers and 10% release time for second year teachers to observe other teachers, attend professional development, work on curriculum, and attend courses” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 199). Correspondingly many countries in Europe and Asia “require formal training for mentor teachers” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 199), some even support coaches for new teachers or reflective discussion support groups (Wei, Andree &

Darling-Hammond, 2009). Teachers in these high-achieving nations typically spend much more time supporting each other throughout their careers as well, some spending “40 to 60% of their time preparing and learning” (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 201), with each other. These vast and varied support systems at the pre-service level and at the school level help to strengthen the teaching practice within the country and are often credited as major contributors to the countries’ success on international assessments (Wei, Andree & Darling-Hammond, 2009). It is clear the United States must emanate these practices in order to stay internationally competitive.

As David Tyack and Larry Cuban (1995) declared in their seminal work, *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, reform is needed that will necessitate “greater efforts to recruit talented people into teaching, to revise programs of teacher education...[and] to make sure they have careful support...” (p. 139). These three areas of need in our teacher preparation programs clearly require drastic change. Although contemporary and historical educational theorists have declared these areas important for decades, and higher achieving nations have proven their effectiveness, the United States’ dismal data has remained. In order to positively affect America’s weakening education system, we must reform the United States’ teacher preparation programs recruitment, curriculum and support systems.

References

- Baker, D.P. & Letendre, G.K., (2005). *National differences, global similarities: World culture and the future of schooling*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Barr, A.S. & Douglas, L. (1934). The pre-training selection of teachers. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 28(2), 92-117.
- <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.its.virginia.edu/stable/27525904>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Greenberg, J., Walsh, K., & McKee, A. (2014). *2014 Teacher Prep Review- A review of the nation's teacher preparation programs*. Retrieved from www.nctq.org
- Mehta, J. (2013). *The allure of order: High hopes, dashed expectations, and the troubled quest to remake American schooling*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Mehta, J., & Doctor, J. (2013). Raising the bar for teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 94(7), 8-13.
- National Council on Teacher Quality. (2012). *State teacher policy yearbook- improving teacher preparation national summary*. Retrieved from: www.nctq.org
- Rice, J.K. (2003). *Teacher Quality: Understanding the effectiveness of teaching attributes*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.
- Rockoff, J. E. (2004). The impact of individual teachers on student achievement: Evidence from panel data. *American Economic Review*, 94(2), 247-252.
- Sahlberg, P. (2010). *The secret to Finland's success: educating teachers*. Stanford, CA: Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education. Retrieved from <http://edpolicy.stanford.edu>

- Sanders, W. L., & Rivers, J. C. (1996). *Cumulative and residual effects of teachers on future student academic achievement*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Value-Added Research and Assessment Center.
- Schmidt, W. H., McKnight, C. (2012). *Inequality for all: The challenge of unequal opportunity in American schools*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Stigler J. W. & Hiebert, J. (1999). *The teaching gap: best ideas from the world's teachers for improving education in the classroom*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Tyack, D., & Cuban, L. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Wei, R., Andree, A., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2009). How Nations Invest in Teachers. *Educational Leadership*, 66(5), 28-33.