



Preparing to Lead an Effective Classroom: The Role of Teacher Training and Professional Development Programs

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The education research community has spent years debating the value of teacher education and professional development programs and their impact on teaching effectiveness and student achievement. These debates will no doubt intensify as Congress turns its attention this year to reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. School reformers and policy analysts are often at odds over the best means to identify talented teachers and improve teaching effectiveness. Debates rage among analysts as well as researchers over the extent to which teachers are prepared before they enter teaching and what counts in order for a new recruit to be deemed qualified and licensed to teach.

However, the overwhelming evidence reveals that high-quality pre-service training increases new teacher retention and improves their effectiveness.¹ Granted, given a more mobile 21st century workforce, teaching must draw on new recruits who enter from multiple pathways and earn their “stripes” on multiple timelines. In the past, both teacher education and professional development has suffered from a one-size-fits-all approach that does not accommodate the difference in knowledge and skills of different recruits and veterans alike.

But while we might make preparation pathways more accessible, preparation for the teaching profession cannot and should not inherently be an *easier* process unless we want to undercut teacher effectiveness entirely. In this policy brief, Teachers Network and the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) consider the ways in which effective professional learning opportunities lay the groundwork for effective teaching.

Unpacking the Evidence on Professional Learning for Teachers

About the Teachers Network Study

With the support of the Ford Foundation, the Teachers Network undertook a national survey of 1,210 teacher leaders, to better understand the role that participation in teacher leadership networks plays in supporting and retaining effective teachers in high-needs urban schools. Follow-up interviews with 29 network participants provided a more nuanced view of ways in which opportunities for collaboration and leadership (within and beyond the classroom) can increase teacher efficacy and effectiveness, and improve the retention of the classroom experts students deserve. The survey sample was drawn from a diverse and accomplished group of preK-12 teacher leaders in every subject area: 93 percent were fully state-certified in their subject area and grade level at the time of the survey, and 78 percent held at least a master’s degree. A majority reported that they worked in urban, high-needs schools, where more than 75 percent of the student body was comprised of low-income or minority students.

The Teachers Network data have some significant limitations, both related to the instruments used and in the fact that subgroups of teachers surveyed were too small to permit meaningful disaggregated analysis.* However, it is a unique data set in that it specifically focuses on the perceptions and career plans of accomplished master teachers in these high-needs schools, many of whom have won teaching awards, participated in action research, or otherwise served as leaders in their profession. In this series of briefs and a culminating research report, we have enriched findings from these data with results from CTQ's ongoing research on teacher working conditions and teacher effectiveness, and from the broader research literature.

Preparing for Effective Teaching

The Teachers Network interview protocols did not specifically solicit any information about teachers' preparation for the classroom, asking only a broad question about how each teacher came to the profession. Nevertheless, many interviewees volunteered information about and opinions of what constitutes high-quality professional preparation – and specifically, about program elements that they found critical to the quality of both traditional university-based and alternative route certification programs.

1. Some teachers asserted that the recruitment strategies and curricula for teacher training programs – in both traditional and alternative routes – were often not well aligned with the needs and contexts of local schools and districts.

Traditional university-based programs tend to recruit and train teacher candidates based on “universal” best practices and do not always take into account local populations and community cultures or the anticipated staffing needs of area school districts. Because graduates tend to teach in or near to the communities in which they trained, this is a critical flaw in the traditional teacher preparation system – and one that inhibits the success of education schools, teacher trainees and districts alike. One teacher, reflecting on how this system should optimally work, noted:

[I think that effective recruitment of teacher candidates is] going to mean [that districts have to start] partnering with universities and colleges, and particularly trying to recruit teachers who understand and fit into the demographics of the schools in which they'll be teaching.

Of course, these concerns impact not only recruitment and selection of candidates for preparation programs but also the curricula that are offered to them as trainees. Traditionally, teacher preparation programs focus on studies of developmental psychology, pedagogy and content. But CTQ case studies and surveys suggest that teachers preparing to teach in high-needs urban schools are also likely to need training in other new curricular areas, as well.² These areas include cultural competencies necessary to work successfully with students and families; additional training for teaching English language learners or special needs students; integrating classroom instruction and strategies with community and after-school resources; and information about curriculum policies that will govern their day-to-day work as future teachers.

* For a fuller discussion of the limitations of these data, please see the full report that accompanies this series of briefs, forthcoming from the Center for Teaching Quality and Teachers Network in February 2010.

2. Teachers cite early, frequent and relevant clinical experiences as a critical component of high-quality professional preparation.

Many teachers especially stressed the importance of regular clinical experiences for preparing effective teachers for high-needs schools, as a way to put curricular topics into practical context. One Teachers Network teacher reflected on how her university-based preparation program had – or more accurately, had not – prepared her for the realities of teaching in a school with 100% eligibility for Free and Reduced Lunch:

I... feel that my teacher preparation program didn't really prepare me for the real things that I experienced. ...Some of the best practices that my pre-service program gave me worked very well in the context of [the affluent school] where I student taught [but not at my high-needs school]. That was hard for me to adjust to... so I wish that [preparation programs] could give... newer teachers a very clear presentation of what they're going to experience, and maybe even an apprenticeship-type program where they're able to [go more deeply into that experience] than as a student teacher.

This teacher seemed to indicate that even the experience of student teaching was not enough to constitute adequate clinical preparation for the classroom. An interview with a teacher at a CTQ case study school in Fall 2009 may shed some additional light on these concerns about clinical experiences that were too brief or not relevant to the context of high-needs schools³:

[What has helped me most] was a year-long internship [through my university-based training program] at a high-needs school. And you know, that is really the way to go with teacher [training] in America. I opened the school year, I closed the school year, I saw it all. I worked with a wonderful mentor teacher. Not like [other programs], where you student teach for just six weeks in a suburban school [and then take a job in a high-needs school]. (*Laughter.*) It doesn't prepare you for the real world.

Teachers Network interviewees echoed that idea, calling for apprenticeships or residencies that would allow teacher trainees to make a more gradual entry into work as full-fledged professionals. One asserted:

You know, in teacher education programs you have a practicum and student teaching, but it's never really on you. And so you don't ever really know what it's like. ...If that first year, instead of being thrown into a classroom by yourself, you were thrown into an apprenticeship where you still were paid and had benefits [like other teachers], you could be in a room with somebody else [who was more accomplished and could guide you].

Research in the field of teacher education tends to support all these teachers' observations and recommendations. A 2008 examination of evidence on teacher education by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that teachers with more extensive clinical training – such as a full-year internship – prior to becoming teachers of record produced greater student achievement gains than peers with less clinically-focused preparation.⁴ In particular, this study found that the most important elements of such clinical programs included the following:

- Well-supervised and extensive student teaching, in a context that was congruent with their placement as first-year teachers;
 - Opportunities “to engage in the actual practices involved in teaching,” such as lesson studies;
 - Opportunities to study and assess local curricula; and
 - A capstone examination that used the teacher candidate’s action research or data-focused portfolio to make a summative judgment about the quality of the candidate’s professional skills.⁵
3. Routes to the classroom that are brief or lacking in deep content may create more pathways into the profession – but the teacher training process cannot be rushed without sacrificing effectiveness. Moreover, passion is no substitute for training and experience.

Traditional university-based teacher preparation is often denigrated as being ineffective, and attracting mediocre candidates with limited commitment to teaching in high-needs schools. Lately, growing numbers of prominent journalists have jumped on the bandwagon, promoting the ideas that teachers do not need much training, and that if new recruits are to be licensed, the sole litmus test should be whether they know their content rather than whether they have the skills to teach it. For example, Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times*, mimicking what he found in a number of recent policy reports, has advocated for “opening (of) classroom doors” so everybody can teach as long as they graduate from a competitive college, know the subjects they teach, and pass a background check.⁶

But a close look at the research evidence countermands the conventional wisdom. Granted, one recent study did find that alternatively trained teachers produce greater achievement gains for their students.⁷ However, a closer look at these results reveals that the gains were of modest statistical significance, and only in math; reading scores were stagnant. Moreover, the study did not control for the fact that these alternative certification candidates actually had *more* clinical experience, mentoring and pedagogical coursework than some of their traditionally-prepared peers – factors which are very likely to explain most of the effects observed.⁸ Indeed, other studies have shown that when alternatively trained teachers had less pedagogical training than other candidates, their students’ achievement scores dropped over the course of the year.⁹ The bottom line appears to be that quality and duration of preparation matter more than the specific pathway. Most differences observed between traditional and alternative programs in general probably are related not to the pathways per se but the ways in which most such programs tend to organize their training.

Two alternatively prepared Teachers Network teachers were the most critical of the lack of time their programs gave them to prepare for the classroom and understand the basics of how schools really worked. A former Teach for America cohort member – who went to a five-week training program and had a first clinical experience as a summer school teacher – said:

You need to spend more than the month that you're given in a summer school classroom [to prepare to be an effective teacher]. ...You don't get to see a regular room environment, you don't get to see systems and how they get in place. ...I did have some support [from a mentor] but I think you really need to spend some time in the classroom, ...watching a teacher manage her or his classroom, for at least [several] months.

Another teacher entered the classroom through a Teaching Fellows program, in which fellows with no prior education experience simultaneously worked on master's degrees and while completing their first two years of teaching. The utter lack of any prior preparation – clinical or theoretical – proved disastrous, as that teacher remembered it:

I was teaching in a very tough school [where violence was common]. And I couldn't even keep the kids in their seats. ...I mean chairs were flying across the room, and it was really because I was ineffective... for the first two years. ...I would feel, whenever there was a fight or something... *If my classroom management were better, then that wouldn't have happened, and maybe those kids wouldn't be hurt right now.* I felt really responsible [but didn't know what to do to address the situation].

Another teacher shared a similar reflection about how lack of preparation time and tools impacted the first year in the classroom:

I think I did a disservice to my kids in my first year. I cared about them. And they knew I genuinely cared about them and their families, and bringing them in and engaging them... and making them value education. But I didn't know the skills that I really needed to give them. ...I did my best, but it wasn't enough.

This teacher's insight is a powerful one: passion for educating high-needs students is not enough to be a successful teacher. High-quality preparation is absolutely essential to teacher effectiveness – and anything less is a disservice to students. Teacher candidates who have time to develop and practice their skills in relevant contexts are much more likely to be effective in resolving these challenges – not just standing amidst chaos, wishing that they had better knowledge and tools to respond.

Professional Development for More Effective Teaching

As with evidence on preparation pathways, research on the relationship between professional development and teacher effectiveness is mixed. Some studies suggest that professional development has no effects at all on effectiveness as measured by student achievement,¹⁰ but these studies tend to group together all types of professional development (including graduate coursework not directly related to teaching or one's content area) and of all quality levels. As a result, any actual effects are lost in the “noise” of such disparate data. More rigorously designed research has found positive correlations between subject-specific professional development and student achievement growth.

For example, researchers have found that teachers who participate in structured dialogues to analyze student work and solve problems in their schools are more likely to change their

teaching practices and improve student achievement.¹¹ Recently, Darling-Hammond and colleagues found that professional development using “scientifically rigorous methodologies” and of certain depth and duration (30 to 100 hours of time over six months to a year) was far more likely to positively impact student achievement.¹² They point to a wealth of research over several decades revealing that collaborative teacher learning is key to advancing school change and improving student learning.

4. Teachers value collaborative professional development experiences – including participation in action research – as the learning opportunities that most strengthen their effective teaching practice.

Research suggests that interactive professional development experiences are among the most likely to produce effectiveness gains, because they allow teachers to build social supports and relationships with colleagues upon which to base future collaboration and professional growth.¹³ Darling-Hammond and colleagues note:

When whole grade levels, schools or departments are involved, they provide a broader base of understanding and support at the school level. Teachers create a critical mass for improved instruction and serve as support groups for each other’s improved practice. Collective work in trusting environments provides a basis for inquiry and reflection into teachers’ own practice, allowing teachers to take risks, solve problems and attend to dilemmas in their practice.¹⁴

A groundbreaking 2009 study demonstrated the importance of building such professional social capital, quantifying the student achievement gains reaped when teachers were able to learn from accomplished peers and develop collective expertise.¹⁵ The importance of collaborative professional development and professional learning communities has been a common thread in CTQ’s case studies, as well as in the Teachers Network sample. One typical Teachers Network interviewee spoke of meeting with peers to share pedagogical skills and strategies – as well as to provide formative peer evaluations of other teachers’ classroom practice:

...We have a professional growth team in place, where we are trained [to take part in] the evaluation process. When new teachers come in [to the school], ...we’re trained and assigned to assist them through four evaluations. We look over their lesson plans [and help them with] any problems they might be having. ...We [also] try to pair up on the grade level so that there’s a common community there, and to bring [new teachers] into the community, sharing ideas and planning collaboratively so that no one is out there on their own. ...We all share, roundtable, what we’re going to do.

While such building-level collaborations for professional development were commonly reported among Teachers’ Network members, they also reported utilizing the wider network of which they were a part for similar purposes. This was particularly the case for teachers who had recently changed schools, subjects or grade levels, suggesting that the network provided them with a stable core of peers on whom they could draw even as their more immediate professional communities and responsibilities changed.

Teachers Network participants also expressed enthusiasm about the action research projects in which they were involved, whether independently or in collaboration with other networked teachers. Teachers mentioned differentiated learning, teaching English language learners, directed subject curriculum, and racial or ethnic issues in schools and classrooms as action research topics that they felt had a direct and positive impact on their professional learning, their effective teaching practice, and their desire to remain in the profession as teacher leaders. Additionally, they viewed meetings with Teacher Network cohorts and at conferences as opportunities to further their preparation as teaching professionals. They were quite clear that professional learning does not – and should not – end after pre-service training and induction:

I think that what's most important is that a teacher's willing to learn and grow continuously. So if you're an "experienced" teacher – you've been teaching ten years – but you no longer go to professional development [or professional conferences and meetings] and you no longer try to hone your craft, then you're not going to be effective anymore.

5. Teachers assert that the most useful professional development experiences are teacher-driven and ongoing.

The action research projects, participation in professional conferences or networks, and mentoring programs that Teachers Network interviewees discussed are quite diverse learning experiences. However, they are united by several factors:

- **They are teacher-led, selected by individuals or groups based on needs related to the subjects and students they teach.** CTQ's case studies and surveys show that teachers who have greater latitude in selecting professional development experiences tend to report getting greater benefit from them and being more satisfied with their experiences.¹⁶ These findings align closely with best practices research, which suggests that the highest-quality professional development experiences are those focused on specific content areas and related instructional strategies,¹⁷ and which are relevant to the community context and needs of the schools in which teachers work.¹⁸
- **They offer opportunities for teachers to be both learners from and teachers of their peers.** Teachers Network participants particularly appreciated professional development that included presentations by master teachers, since it was more likely to be informed by lived classroom experiences, and focused on relevant topics. They also valued *providing* professional development experiences, which forced them to make what had become intuitive knowledge about teaching practice more explicit, and to build professional connections with other peers – another emerging best practice for professional development.¹⁹
- **Participation was ongoing.** Research shows that the most effective professional development is of longer duration, ideally one day or more in length.²⁰ However, most school or district sponsored professional development experiences are far shorter. By contrast, professional development in which teachers engaged through Teachers Network was nearly always ongoing – 24/7 in the case of virtual collaborations and communities, and over months or years for action research. It

therefore is not surprising that Teachers Network participants were so enthusiastic about, and positively affected by, these experiences.

6. Peer learning opportunities, including mentoring, are critical supports – especially for beginning or less-accomplished teachers – and contribute both to instructional effectiveness and retention.

While teachers appreciate the structure that formal learning opportunities provide, informal opportunities to learn from colleagues were also valuable supports for members of Teachers Network communities. Both formal and informal mentoring relationships emerged as an important element of professional development, by allowing teachers to learn from more accomplished colleagues. A majority of Teachers Network interviewees spoke of working with more experienced colleagues early in their careers, who helped them improve their skills through informal mentoring and reflective teaching practice. These relationships provided ongoing peer-to-peer professional development but really crossed boundaries among training, collaboration and leadership development issues. One interviewee connected informal mentoring with the formal professional development that happens within the Teachers Network communities:

I would say the most important step we can take is if each one of us who's a veteran teacher reaches out to a new teacher in some way. [We could] help bring that new teacher into the fold so that they feel like they have someone... who's going to... lend an ear, give them some advice.

Where colleagues within a school building are less than collegial or not accomplished enough to offer assistance to new teachers, schools may reach a negative tipping point. One teacher specifically cited lack of administrative and peer supports as contributing to teachers' ineffectiveness and attrition in the early years of her career:

...I got this job teaching 7th and 8th grade [for the first time]. And there were no supplies, there was very little support [within my school], ...it was violent. ...And in addition to that, by the end of the year, all of the teachers... on my grade team were gone except for [one other teacher besides myself]. ...So the children even were asking, 'Well, when are you going to quit?'

In such circumstances, teachers found that access to a larger professional community, such as a Teachers Network community, could help to fill that gap. The teacher quoted above went on to describe how network peers helped turn a difficult and unsuccessful teaching experience around:

I decided after the winter break that while they'd lost all of these other teachers, I was going to stay. ...I was going to figure out a way to make it work for the kids and me. So I read a lot, and I talked to a lot of other people [in the network] who had been [teaching] for a long time – and those people were not in my school, but they gave me some ideas of things that I could do [to improve my teaching practice]. And I came in at the beginning of January and... started fresh.

Some pundits argue that passion and determination are critical ingredients for teacher success. Those characteristics were assuredly present for this teacher and likely contributed to the teacher's willingness to join the network and seek out assistance from network colleagues. But this teacher was also clear that those qualities alone were not enough to spark the turnaround that made her more effective in her classroom. It was only through those peer-to-peer mentoring relationships that she found the support and information she needed to improve.

Several teachers cautioned, however, that formal mentoring programs were sometimes pro forma affairs. Some of the California Teachers Network members spoke disparagingly of their state's official mentoring program, the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) program, which one teacher referred to as the "Beginning Teacher Harassment Program." Their typical critique of this and similar programs was that the focus was on paperwork and spending mandated time with mentors, rather than on the quality of that time and what first-year teachers learned from their mentors. Even the critics of such programs, however, asserted the need for mentoring supports. Teachers suggested that time releases for both beginning teachers and their mentors might help to reduce time pressures on both groups, allowing them to focus more on the quality of the teaching and learning they were doing together.

Implications

Examination of Teachers Network and other data suggests that preparation and professional development are closely interwoven with collaboration and leadership opportunities. Because of these connections, the best proposals for creating and supporting professional learning for effective teachers will incorporate elements of each.

- **A high-quality, clinically intensive preparation program is what matters most for training effective new teachers – not whether it is a traditional or alternative route into the profession.** Neither traditional nor alternative pathways have a "lock" on those program attributes; indeed, there are high- and lower-quality programs of both types. However, the most successful programs will seek to extend learning and clinical time for trainees to the greatest extent possible, offer training in diverse pedagogical skills and rich content, and provide opportunities to apply such information in real classrooms. K-12 schools might also begin to view themselves as partners with universities in the teacher preparation process by offering paid internships and apprenticeships like those developed by Long Beach Unified School District and California State University-Long Beach.
- **To be most effective, teacher preparation programs should align training closely with the needs of the schools and districts that their teacher trainees will serve.** Alternative certification programs most consciously consider local demand for teachers in particular areas, subjects or levels, and demographic groups when conducting recruitment and selection of candidates. Teach for America, for instance, has been widely recognized for its efforts to recruit and place additional STEM and minority teachers in high-needs schools nationwide. However, urban teacher residencies (UTRs) and traditional preparation programs that incorporate high levels of clinical preparation (because of their longer duration and links to university resources) generally are able to offer much more in-depth training to prepare new teachers for effective teaching in high-needs schools.

Most university-based preparation programs have traditionally not practiced alignment strategies to ensure that they supply the kinds and numbers of teachers that local schools need. But in fact, there are few if any real barriers – beyond time and will to coordinate – to *any* teacher preparation program or pathway that seeks to put such alignment strategies in place. A forthcoming paper from the Center for Teaching Quality in Spring 2010 will examine some best practices for doing so, based on the collaborations among several school districts and preparation pathways in the Denver metro area.

- **Teacher preparation is not a “one and done” proposition.** Professional learning for teachers has traditionally been front-loaded: four to five years of training at a university program, possibly early-career supports in an induction program, and sporadic workshops thereafter. However, the realities of the profession, and the workforce in general, are changing. Comparatively high rates of out-of-field teaching are well-documented in high-needs schools. Education budget cuts due to the recession have forced unprecedented numbers of reductions in force (RIFs) over the past year, driving remaining teachers to change to a new grade level or subject area – for which they may or may not be well-prepared – on a moment’s notice. Moreover, we expect today’s college graduates to change careers multiple times throughout their working lives. Professional development and support systems for teachers must evolve to meet these needs, if we are to have well-prepared and effective teachers in every classroom.
- **When teachers have greater ability to direct the professional development they receive, they are more likely both to appreciate those experiences and to improve their classroom practice as a result of them.** Teachers have a wealth of knowledge about the students they teach – and, particularly among more accomplished teachers, seem to “know what they don’t know” about the best strategies to reach them. Certainly, schools and districts will have their own strategies for preparing teachers for ongoing local changes and challenges. Whenever possible, however, teachers should be involved in not only selecting but participating in the leadership of professional development experiences.
- **Professional networks for teachers offer an additional outlet for professional learning – either through formal programs or in informal peer-to-peer contexts.** Ideally, every teacher would have access to a robust professional learning community within the same building. But not all schools are so collegial, and some teachers – such as English language learner specialists – may be in one-of-a-kind positions within their schools or districts. Interviews with Teachers Network participants affirm that in such cases, membership in a larger, external professional network can help to fill that gap.

About Teachers Network and the Center for Teaching Quality

Teachers Network, a national nonprofit organization, leverages the creativity and expertise of a national and international community of outstanding educators to transform public schools into creative learning communities. Over the past three decades, Teachers Network has brought together 1.5 million classroom teachers in over 20 network affiliate communities for professional development that hones both classroom practice and instructional leadership.

The Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) grew out of the work of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, which established teacher quality as the central school-based factor in students' academic success. CTQ seeks to improve student learning and advance the teaching profession by cultivating teacher leadership, conducting timely research, and crafting smart policy — all in an effort to ensure that every student in America has a qualified, well-supported and effective teacher.

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