Teachers' Opinions on Teacher Preparation:
A Gap between College and Classroom

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Teacher preparation evaluation has expanded rapidly since 1998, pushed by "failing" rhetoric adopted by many educational leaders, such as Michelle Rhee, founder of the Students First organization. Led by the ideas and arguments put forth by Diane Ravitch, others think that there is too much focus on red herrings and that there are, in fact, problems with the educational system, but not the ones with which decision and policy makers have become enamored. Despite this dichotomy, the former group is prevailing, giving the American education system a narrative of inadequacy and failure, and making the idea of data driven evaluation, at all levels, the answer to "fixing" American education.

Between the two sides the voices of teachers have either been absent, or deemphasized when used, despite being the people on the front line of the "crisis". The goal of this research was to gather the opinions of teachers about how effective they felt their college programs were in training them to become the teacher they wanted to be. The goal was not to re-diagnose a particular problem from a different point of view, or offer solutions to perceived issues, but instead to bring some attention to a set of voices that has been consistently overlooked by mainstream media, college program evaluations, and much of the academic literature.

During the 2012 London Olympics, several commercials were aired by Students First, a "nonprofit organization fighting for one purpose: to make sure every student in America has access to great schools and great teachers" ("About Students First," 2014). They compared the state of the U.S. education system to the skill displayed by a middle-aged out of shape man in Olympic level competitions. A woman's voice speaks over the performance: "The sad truth is, this is our education system. And it can't compete with the rest of the world," while the recent U.S. rankings from PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) were displayed on screen: "17th in Science; 25th in Math" (Toporek, 2012). The general tone seemed to be linking the future success of the United States to our scores on international exams, and that the current perspective of U.S. excellence is misplaced.

Missing from the commercial series is the historical trend of U.S. performance on international student exams. On the First International Mathematics Exam, given in the 1960s, the U.S. placed 11th of 12 countries at the 13 year-old level (Medrich & Griffith, 1992, p. 67) and

last of 12 countries at the high school senior level (p. 68). Despite these low scores, the U.S. remained the largest economy in the world, solidified its hegemonic status and has not become irrelevant, as much as the current rhetoric would suggest happens when the U.S. does poorly on the international exams.

It would be easy to believe, listening to the mainstream media reports and perusing the literature, that U.S. schools are failing. These narratives seem to hinge on U.S. student performance on domestic and international exams (Murray 2002), concerns about grade inflation ("The Education Crisis", 2014), and the current and future economic competitiveness of American workers (graduates of U.S. schools) ("The Education Crisis," 2014).

While there are, in fact, data that support this argument, there are also success stories. Diane Ravitch, an educational historian and former policy maker, has made an about face in her opinion on public education, now advocating that, while changes need to be made, the current perceptions on the problems miss the mark completely. According to her view, the true problems in the U.S. education system stem from economic inequality and socioeconomic and racial segregation (Ravitch, 2012).

The problems of U.S. society are expected to be solved by reforming curricula, class times, teaching styles, standards levels, testing requirements, etc. PK-12 education has been the primary target of popular media and the lay public for reform, but over the past decade and a half or so, more policy attention has been given to the way educators are trained. Since these are the people who are held directly responsible for the success of a school, and therefore, apparently, the success of the nation, it seems only right that reform efforts be directed at teacher training.

The Higher Education Act, reauthorized in 1998, required states to identify low performing programs and assist these programs in becoming better (Higher Education, 2008). According to a policy brief created by the Education Sector, an education arm of the social science research organization American Institutes for Research (AIR), by 2009 (11 years later), more than half of all states had never identified a teacher preparation program as at-risk or low-performing (Aldeman, Carey, Dillon, Miller & Silva, 2011, p. 4,6). Of more than 1,400 education programs across the nation, only 37, or 2% of, programs were identified as "Low Performing" in 2010 (Our Future, 2011, p. 6), despite only 20.3% of all first year teachers across the nation being "very well prepared" to handle a range of classroom management and discipline situations, 20.7% of all first year teachers being "very well prepared" to select and adapt

curriculum and instructional materials, and only 19.7% of all first year teachers being "very well prepared" to assess their students in the 2007-08 school year (Cogshall, Bivona, & Recshly, 2012, p. 3).

In 2008, HEA was reauthorized. However, there was again a push for more accountability of Schools of Education, leading to the creation of "Our Future, Our Teachers: The Obama Administration's Plan for Teacher Education Reform and Improvement" in 2011, a more comprehensive set of policies and guidelines for reviewing teacher preparation programs across the country. The evaluation measures shifted from the input-heavy 440 data point questionnaire, to output-heavy measures such as student achievement rates, job placement and retention rates, and survey data gathered from recent graduates and their principals (Our Future, 2011, p. 9-10).

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Research Question and Goals

Between the two sides the voices of teachers have either been absent, or deemphasized when used, despite being the people on the front line of the "crisis." It is this gap on which I focused my research. Given the diverse demands of schools, and therefore teachers, and the lack of teacher voice in the evaluation of their preparation, my research question is: "Does the education a teacher receives in college prepare them for the demands that are placed on schools?" The goal of this research was to gather the opinions of teachers about how effective they felt their college programs were in training them to become the teacher they wanted to be. The goal was not to re-diagnose a particular problem from a different point of view, or offer solutions to perceived issues, but instead to bring some attention to a set of voices that has been

consistently overlooked by mainstream media, college program evaluations, and much of the academic literature.

Literature Review: Teacher Efficacy and Expectations of Students

There have been countless studies done with the idea of self-efficacy in mind. Much of the literature I encountered used, either as a foundation or to counter, Albert Bandura's (1977) model of self-efficacy. His model is based on the idea that a person's belief or perception in his/her own ability to achieve certain goals, his/her self-efficacy, is primarily influenced by external situations and events (p. 192). These perceptions of one's own ability have extraordinary influence over one's behavior, affecting one's ability to perform a task or achieve a goal independent of his/her actual ability (p. 192-193).

If this is true, then one of the most important factors for determining a good teacher, meaning one who is able to meet the goals and tasks set by themselves, students, administration, parents, etc., is the teacher's belief in his/her own ability to meet those goals and tasks. A study in 1984 by Gibson and Dembo attempted to develop an instrument to measure teacher efficacy and use this variable to examine the relationship between teacher efficacy and observable teaching behavior. Their research, using factor analysis, multivariate-multi-method analysis, and classroom observation found that teacher efficacy is in fact measurable along at least two dimensions: "a teacher's sense of personal responsibility in student learning and/or behavior" which is directly relatable to Bandura's self-efficacy dimension (p. 573); and "a teacher's belief that *any* teacher's ability to bring about change is significantly limited by factors external to the teacher, such as home environment, family background, and parental influences," which is consistent with Bandura's outcome expectancy dimension (p. 574). This dimension asserts that factors contributing to teacher efficacy converge with, but can be differentiated from, verbal ability and flexibility, which are two other constructs already known to be able to determine effective teachers (p. 576), and that "teacher efficacy may influence certain patterns of behavior known to yield achievement gains" (p. 579).

Another study, done in 1990 by Housego set out to link student teachers' "self-estimates of preparedness to teach" (p. 38) with the concept of personal teaching efficacy as developed by Bandura in a reciprocal deterministic model. Housego created a "Student Teachers' Feelings of Preparedness to Teach" Scale (or the PREP Scale) that was designed to measure how prepared

students felt about completing a set of tasks identified from one of their education courses at the University of British Columbia. The course was part of the education degree program at the university and each learning objective set out in the syllabus became part of the scale. For example, if the syllabus said that "students will choose the best strategies for motivating pupils," then the question on the PREP scale read "I feel prepared to choose the best strategies to motivate pupils" (p. 42-43).

The results of the study showed that many students had a high feeling of preparedness on items such as question design and pupil motivation at the beginning of the year, even before starting student teaching. However, "most felt less well prepared to deal with student behavior problems, to group and assess learners, and to choose suitable methods of teaching, all of which could be viewed as requiring more specialized preparation" (p. 46). Further, over the course of their teacher education year students generally felt more prepared to begin teaching. There were three data collection periods, in October, January and March, and each session revealed more confidence in the respondents (p. 47). While this could have been confounded with feelings of preparedness to student teach, rather that teaching, it was clear that more time spent in the classroom student teaching and taking classes increased the PREP scale scores.

However, Housego also found that some items on the scale improved more than others. The top 25% of improving items involved "aspects of planning, individualized treatment of problem behavior, understanding and using inductive and deductive methods, and evaluating materials" (p. 50). The 25% least improved items were "questioning, assessment of both pupil learning and one's own teaching, and motivation" (p. 50).

Further, this study divided teachers into subgroups based on the type of teacher (i.e., art and music vs. math, science and business) they would become and found that there were significant differences in feelings of preparedness between different types of teachers. For example, in the October data collection, music and art teachers felt the most prepared, and significantly more than the next group of math, business, and economics (p. 50-53). Similar differences were found in each data collection period, but spoke to the differences in needs for various teachers.

In 2012, a study was presented that looked at teacher efficacy in classrooms with diverse student learning needs, a diverse student body, and differing cultures. The literature was suggesting that teachers were feeling unprepared to handle dynamic classrooms, which is a

distressing trend given knowledge of changing U.S. demographics. Casey and Gable (2012) used a 10 item survey, a focus group and interviews to research how well prepared teachers felt to implement differentiated instruction. They concluded that,

> While the vast majority of participating teachers reported feeling prepared and confident to differentiate instruction, they also revealed that many aspects of differentiation challenged their beliefs about teaching and fairness, ultimately limiting their attempts at differentiation to surface-level. (p. 26)

In their paper Casey and Gable argue that deep structure differentiation is most effective in meeting the needs of a diverse classroom, which involves differentiating assignments according to readiness level of the student, assessing students with rubrics, or allowing students to progress at their own pace (p. 20). As noted in their conclusion, teachers felt comfortable with implementing their own view of differentiated instruction, but when it came to pedagogy that was in contrast with pre-conceived notions about teaching in general, and to a diverse student body, the differentiation remained at the surface level (p. 17-20, 26-27). Indeed, there was such a conflict between beliefs about what differentiated instruction entailed, and what it actually was, that most respondents reverted to a hybrid of traditional teaching, meaning no differentiation for students, which has been proven to fail in communities with a diverse student body (p. 22-23).

These three studies show the importance and influence that preconceived notions about teaching in general and one's ability to teach have on the actual behavior of teachers. Each occurred in a different decade, but all were rooted in the idea of self-efficacy: that one's feelings of preparedness affects his/her ability to achieve set tasks and goals. The first study identified self-reporting as a limitation, as only a first step in linking personal teaching efficacy (one's view on one's own ability) and teacher efficacy (one's view on capabilities of teachers and the teaching profession in general) to the Bandura model, and to creating a theory that can predict the effectiveness of a teacher. The second focused on student teachers' feelings, meaning it has a limitation of not necessarily informing the reader about teachers' feelings of preparedness once they have started their teaching career. The third study had a relatively small sample size of 30 respondents to the survey, four interviews and a 10 person focus group. However, it was the only one that could both take the opinions of people who have gone through a college preparation program and make a suggestion about what needs to be done differently to make the graduates more prepared to meet the needs of diversifying schools.

Most of the literature that I found did not link teachers' opinions to the effectiveness of their college preparation program and instead linked their feelings of preparedness to their ability to teach students. My research was oriented in what seems to be the opposite direction of most of the literature: taking the opinions of teachers to be an evaluation of the program that they completed instead of just as an indicator of student achievement. To be clear, I am not deemphasizing the link between teacher efficacy, their ability to teach, and student achievement. Rather, I want to see what teachers have to say about the programs they completed in order to understand if what is expected of students in college teacher preparation programs is enough.

Research Methods

The primary instrument in the research was an 18-question online survey via Qualtrics. Five principals in the Central New York area agreed to pass the survey along to their staff, making it clear that it was completely voluntary. Every respondent had a full two weeks after starting the survey to complete it, though the survey was only designed to take 10 to 20 minutes. The survey was live for a total of three weeks. A respondent could choose what questions they wanted to answer and did not have to answer all of them in order to complete the survey. The entire project was designed with the idea in mind that it was a pilot study. The questions were not meant to be exhaustive on any particular topic, but were instead meant to identify general themes of opinion.

Analysis of the data took place after the survey closed. Simply reviewing the percentages and frequencies of responses was interesting in and of itself yielded much of the basis for creating certain themes of opinion. Grouping questions based on their responses increased the depth of these themes, as will be shown in the next section.

The experiential diversity of respondents was limited, or was only minimally captured, skewing heavily to the upper side on the experience spectrum, therefore precluding a more extensive analysis of changing perceptions with increased time teaching.

Survey Results and Findings/Discussion

There were 82 responses to the survey across the five schools, of which 74 were complete responses usable for analysis. I did not ask how many teachers were in each school, but from publically available data online I gathered that there were about 270 teachers in the five schools

that could have completed the survey. Therefore, the response rate is about 27%, or just below 1 in 3. According to the Instructional Assessment Resources from the University of Texas at Austin (2014), the average response rate for an online survey is 30%, meaning the response rate for my research is relatively normal.

The survey respondents have backgrounds in every grade level, a variety of subject areas, are mainly veteran teachers (86% teaching more than five years), and teach in suburban and rural areas. Further, there is a very strong representation of New York State colleges in the survey, specifically SUNY schools and particularly SUNY Oswego and SUNY Cortland, which account for 36% of Bachelor's degrees and 47% of Master's degrees.

While there were several themes that emerged during the analysis of the results, I focused on only one in this paper*: Graduating from a college teacher preparation program does not mean you are ready to be the teacher you want to be.* Perhaps the most important question for this entire project was: How well do you feel college prepared you to become an effective teacher? The majority (93%) of responses were in two categories: "College laid a good foundation, but I learned much more by being in the classroom" (63%), and "I felt somewhat prepared, but need(ed) to do a lot more work on my own to be the teacher I want(ed) to be" (30%). Only 3% of respondents chose "College prepared me extremely well to be the teacher I wanted to be," and only 4% of respondents chose "I did not feel prepared to be the teacher I wanted to be after graduating college."

The first response, "extremely well," and the last response were the two unqualified responses, meaning choosing the first one is saying you were ready to step into your classroom and start teaching, while choosing the last one meant you were hardly better off than when you first began college. Some positivity could be gleaned from this data in that only 4% felt completely unprepared after exiting college, but that is 1 in 25 teachers. Further, 63% said college laid a good foundation and 30% said that they only felt "somewhat prepared." According to these results, being in the classroom and teaching oneself outside of a structured process were ways a majority of teachers felt they became prepared to become better teachers. Moreover, there is a strong correlation between a teacher's self-efficacy, or their perceived ability to teach, and their performance in the classroom (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Housego, 1990; Casey & Gable, 2012; Lee, Tice, Collins, Brown, Smith & Fox, 2012). Teacher performance is important because one year of a "bad" teacher can have long lasting negative

effects on the student, including lower future test scores (Sanders & Horn, 1998) and even reading ability ten years later (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997).

At the other end of the spectrum, only 3% of respondents said that they felt extremely well prepared after exiting college. Given the other two choices that say some variation of "college started the process, but I had to do more to finish it," this is the only option that says "college brought me exactly where I needed to be to be the teacher I wanted to be." This is not necessarily a "good" reflection on programs that are meant to create teachers.

It is clear from this question that there is a gap between teacher preparation and the classroom. If there were no gap, then teachers would be saying that their college preparation was all they needed to do to become a teacher which would have been response #1 in this question. Instead, teachers are saying they needed "college and…" to become a teacher. Looking at the next question brings this idea more into focus.

This next question asked: Do you think graduating with a degree in education from your last college means you and your peers were ready to become teachers? As with the previous question, the two unqualified responses (4% chose "Yes, we were all capable of having our own classroom immediately", and 11% chose "No, I felt like we were not well equipped to begin teaching) received the lowest response rates, indicating low levels of perceived complete preparedness. The middle three responses indicated that some respondents thought more schooling was needed even after the program ended (15%), that some people should not have continued on with teaching (26%) and that they were generally ready, but spending time with a more experienced teacher in the beginning would have been helpful (38%). Most respondents chose this third choice (response 4), suggesting that more guidance was needed after leaving college. Essentially, the response indicates that the respondents were ready to begin to teaching, but could have been more ready, could have been better off, if they were paired with a strong teacher in the beginning.

Of note here are some responses in the "other" category. Five percent chose other. One respondent commented: "Yes I was prepared for teaching, but I taught special education for three years and I as well as many of my friends in college felt we did not receive enough instruction on developing IEP's [Individualized Education Program] and how to conduct an IEP meeting. I learned all of it on the job" (definition added). This response indicates a specific gap between

college and classroom in special education, which is well documented (Hehir, 2002; Greenwood & Abbott, 2001).

The next question relevant to this theme is: "How important were each of the following for developing you as a teacher?" The respondents were given nine categories to rate, four are shown here:

The first two categories, "My own ability to improve" and "Learning from other teachers in the school(s) that I work(ed) in," are completely decoupled from the college preparation experience and the latter two, "The education courses I did in college" and "My subject area course work in college," are directly linked to the college preparation experience. There are two related ideas to pull from these data. First, is that a vast majority of respondents said that the first two categories (85 and 88%) were "Very Important" to developing them as a teacher, and, in fact, all respondents said that these two categories were some variation of important. No one said that these were unimportant, or even gave the neutral response. Conversely, the second two categories, while still receiving a majority "important" rating, had a much more diverse range of answers. Indeed, 26% of respondents gave the "education courses" category a neutral or negative rating and 9% gave the "subject area coursework" a neutral or negative rating. These respondents are saying that parts of the college curriculum for their education degree were completely unimportant to, or did not help advance, their development as a teacher. Further, only 21% of respondents said the education coursework was "very important," which is only a quarter the number who said "very important" of the first two categories. Also, only 51% responded with "very important" for the subject area course work. Clearly, the respondents to this question are saying that their "own ability to approve" and "learning from other teachers" are more important ways of developing as a teacher than what they learned in college.

The final question of the survey was a comment section where respondents could add any additional thoughts they may have had about anything brought up in the survey, or anything else about the topic. Fifteen respondents added comments, many of which gave similar general ideas. For example:

A- "There is way too much theory and pie in the sky education courses and assignments. Nothing can replace working with a strong mentor teacher that gives you free rein, but also is supportive and present. I feel like I wasted my money on grad school…"

B- "Life has been the best teacher for me as a teacher… More real life education – hands on training is needed, theories are great – but they are theories and they have their place but should not be the overall approach to teaching teachers to teach."

C- "I feel that more experience in actual classrooms throughout the entire college career would be more beneficial."

These three comments illustrate the results of the questions presented previously.   There is a disconnect between what is expected in the classroom and what a teacher is given from a college preparation program. The comments reveal that theory is perceived to be focused on something other than the actual "how-to" of teaching. Further, each of these participants said that more hands-on experience was needed, and this was echoed in the other comments as well. Participants A and B both identified subject area course work as being more important than the educational "theory" courses, though they were careful in saying that the way they did their subject area coursework left much to be wanted.

According to the responses to these questions, which are teachers' perceptions of their college experiences, there is a gap between the college and classroom. A college teacher preparation program did not bring the majority of respondents to where they felt fully comfortable in teaching in their own classroom.

Limitations and Opportunities

There are several limitations that should be kept in mind when reviewing this research. First is scope: the survey instrument only captured the opinions of suburban and rural Central New York teachers, the majority of which were veteran teachers. There was a large focus on respondents who went through the SUNY system, which can be an interesting story about the programs in those systems, but it means that this study is not as representative of private institutions. Further, nearly all respondents were educated in New York State, which means generalizations made beyond NYS are not advised. As the other studies I brought up in the literature review have noted, these are opinions which are not necessarily transferrable from one person to the next. Two people could go through the same teaching program and have very different perceptions afterward. This research should be understood as a collection of opinions about teachers' feelings of preparedness when entering their teaching careers.

There are several opportunities for further research that extend from this study. First, a more robust set of survey questions with a fuller demographic section could distinguish among gender, race, age, etc. to see if subgroups of teachers feel more or less prepared than other groups. Further research also could identify whether this gap is meant to be there; whether the college programs were designed to produce fully prepared teachers, or whether they are designed to produce a semi-developed teacher and allow other experiences to develop them the rest of the way. Aligning this survey with specific in-classroom expectations, such as classroom management, pupil motivation, students' job skills, etc., may be insightful for identifying particular gaps in preparedness.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the only persons who can say if they are prepared enough or not are the actual individuals who are teaching. So I asked them. The general response was "somewhat." It turns out that teacher preparation is not just college; it is not just going to a School of Education and getting a degree. There is a gap between college preparation and societal demands for its teachers. This gap is filled via various methods, including apprenticeships, learning from other teachers in the schools, learning "on the job" and relying on oneself to make personal improvements. We cannot just let educators tackle this task on their own. We need to listen to what they say they need in order to improve the effectiveness of our current and future teachers.

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