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A Look in the Mirror

Challenging "Business As Usual" in Teacher Preparation

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EIGHT YEARS AGO, WHEN I BECAME DEAN OF EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO (UIC), A senior program officer at a local foundation challenged me to re-envision what a college of education could do to improve the quality of the teachers we prepare for Chicago's public schools. He passionately decried what he called "business as usual." A few years later, exercising harsher language, leaders of the Council of the Great City Schools, a consortium of superintendents and board members from the largest urban school districts in the U.S., berated me and my fellow deans for our collective failure to prepare their teachers to teach reading. No surprise, then, that Reid Lyon, until recently chief of the Child Development and Behavior Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, claimed that – were he responsible for making the laws – he would blow up colleges of education. He since recanted this threat, but recently left NICHD to develop for-profit teacher education programs for the American College of Education.

A NUMBER OF RECENT, HIGH-PROFILE SYNTHESES OF RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF TEACHER EDUCATION ON STUDENT LEARNING HAVE SHOWN LITTLE IN THE WAY OF EFFECTS, REINFORCING THE PUBLIC VIEW THAT SCHOOLS OF EDUCATION ARE MARGINAL PLAYERS IN EDUCATION REFORM AND STUDENT LEARNING.

The *raison d'etre* for traditional schools of education has radically shifted in recent years. We have never been so vulnerable. Research demonstrates that schools have been remarkably unsuccessful at reducing the unacceptable achievement gap between black and Latino students, on the one hand, and white students, on the other, and some have laid the blame at the feet of those who prepare teachers. A number of recent, high-profile syntheses of research on the effects of teacher education on student learning have shown little in the way of effects, reinforcing the public view that schools of education are marginal players in education reform and student learning. Like it or not (frequently not), changes in our work are long overdue. This article describes how we who are teacher educators at UIC began to reconceptualize and understand our own responsibility for the preparation of teachers for urban Chicago.

A LOOK IN THE MIRROR

At the beginning, we looked at our own record of outcomes. Like every other school of education, we trumpeted our successes and points of pride in our alumni magazines and annual reports. But, truth to tell, we didn't really know much about what happened to our teacher candidates after graduation day. We didn't know whether they ended up with teaching positions or never entered the profession at all. We didn't know if they flocked to teach in the suburbs or remained in the city. We didn't know if they remained in their teaching positions, switched schools, or quit – or how and why they made their career decisions. We didn't know if they were effective in helping their students learn. We didn't even know if they passed their state certification tests and obtained teaching certificates after completing our programs!

We were hearing about the extreme scarcity of qualified chemistry and physics teachers for Chicago high schools, while our chemistry and physics certification programs were graduating barely three candidates a year. We heard about the shortage of mathematics teachers in the city, and sent our student teachers to the suburbs. We also heard about the oversupply of elementary teachers, and continued producing dozens of elementary teachers, even adding an additional alternative certification program. We regularly received urgent requests to help fill hundreds of special education teacher vacancies, but we were mired for years in the complexities of complying with new state requirements for special education certification programs. No wonder superintendents and board members rail against schools of education!

Were we part of the problem or part of the solution? We honestly didn't know. But we started viewing our not-knowing as a form of complacency that was problematic – even morally reprehensible. And so we started on a journey to find out the truth about ourselves. In so doing, we shifted our priorities, revised (and are still revising) our curricula, and began to ask ourselves new questions. In some ways, we've become more cantankerous with one another, but we've also become more relevant.

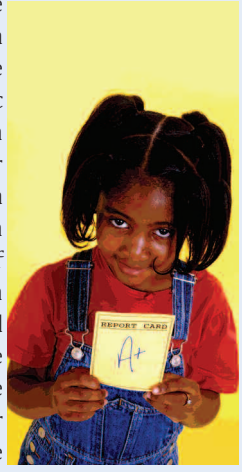
We started by asking ourselves whether our graduates were teaching where Chicago Public Schools (CPS) most needed good teachers. In Chicago's high-poverty west and south side communities, principals faced high teacher turnover and higher-than-average numbers of teachers who were uncertified or in fast-track alternative certification programs. Moreover, these principals routinely experienced high vacancy rates in mathematics, science, and special education. These factors contributed to long-standing patterns of underachievement. By mapping where our post-1995 teacher candidates headed after graduation, we were able to see how many teachers migrated to which public schools, coded by student ethnicity.

It is worth interjecting here that since the early 1990s our university has been committed to increasing our urban internship and student teaching experiences, relative to suburban placements, across roughly 20 certification programs. We initially heard plenty of complaints, outcries, and outright threats from anxious and angry family members, students themselves, and even faculty who were certain we were placing them or their loved ones' lives in jeopardy in dangerous, out-of-control city schools. While UIC is the fifth most ethnically diverse university in the United States,

EN BREF **Il y a plusieurs années, à la suite d'un auto-examen exhaustif, la Faculté d'éducation de l'Université de l'Illinois à Chicago a constaté qu'elle ne préparait pas ses étudiants et ses étudiantes à enseigner dans les écoles et les disciplines où on avait le plus besoin d'eux. Elle a donc revu son mandat et décidé de mettre davantage l'accent sur une formation préalable qui prépare les étudiants et les étudiantes à travailler dans les écoles où le manque de bons enseignants est le plus aigu, soit les écoles des quartiers afro-américains de Chicago où le taux de roulement du personnel est élevé et le rendement des élèves faible. Ce virage a suscité de nouvelles pratiques en matière de placement, de nouvelles options curriculaires, de nouvelles possibilités au niveau du recrutement et une nouvelle raison d'être éducative.**

the majority of students in our teacher preparation programs are middle-class white females. This is in stark contrast to Chicago's public schools, which consist of predominantly poor black or poor Latino students.

In some areas, our mapping exercise yielded no surprises. UIC's teachers have often found positions in Chicago's magnet or selective schools, and we also knew they were in demand in the schools serving the city's low-income Latino students that comprise roughly 22 percent of the city's 435,000 students. But it was shocking to us to see how few were teaching in the large low-income African American communities on Chicago's West and South Sides. More than half of Chicago's 600-plus public schools serve predominantly African American students; yet, despite our practice of placing student teachers in city schools, many of the schools on the West and South Sides had none of our recent graduates on staff. When we dug deeper into the data and examined in which city schools we were placing our student teachers, we found at least one contributing factor to the mystery. While we placed the vast majority of our students in diverse, magnet or Latino schools, our student teachers were virtually absent from schools serving predominantly low-income, African American students. Indeed, our West Side presence comprised exclusively magnet schools and schools serving Latino students.



GOING WHERE GOOD TEACHERS ARE NEEDED MOST

How did we address the problem of the virtual absence of our teachers from Chicago's predominantly African American schools? Simply, we started to redirect our teacher preparation efforts to Chicago's West Side, targeting predominantly African American schools in Chicago neighborhoods that exhibit high teacher turnover rates and low student achievement. Arguably, these are schools serving the children who most need our best teachers.

It seemed to us that when institutions avoid placing teacher candidates in struggling schools, and instead vie for scarce placements in well-functioning schools, the Matthew effect thrives. Where teacher candidates do not practice and gain confidence, they tend not to seek teaching positions. When principals can't recruit well-prepared teachers, they resort to hiring uncertified or under-prepared teachers, thereby perpetuating the cycle of teachers who are unlikely to persevere and who contribute to high teacher turnover rates.

Beyond beginning to shift our placement sites, we challenged faculty to think about how our existing curricula would help our candidates succeed in supporting student learning on Chicago's West Side. We developed and implemented exemplary alternative certification programs that specifically target district teacher shortages. And we pursued "Grow Your Own" teacher preparation programming for residents of impoverished communities who want to become teachers. Each route has its own plusses and minuses, and it is still not known which, or what combination, will yield teachers who can best support student learning.

Our institutional context certainly influences our strategies. In our particular urban university ecology, for example, revising our current programs may prove more difficult than starting anew, but at least our programs are already securely institutionalized and funded. Alternative certification programs that are more adaptable to local contexts and more attractive to career changers, at least initially, are more difficult to sustain, given the costs of intensive mentoring and a less secure funding base. "Grow Your Own" programming, wherein local community residents are provided pathways to teacher certification, holds the promise of having children taught by adults from their home communities. The same adults, however, are often themselves the recipients of an inferior education and have to make up considerable academic ground, adding years – and sizeable costs – to a program, before embarking on professional education courses. Yet their knowledge of the community and the lives of its children and youth could not be greater.

MOVING BEYOND THE FAMILIAR

We encouraged the placement of more teacher candidates in targeted West Side schools serving African American students. In doing so, we anticipated that prospective teachers would be more likely to accept positions after graduation in schools where they were already familiar with the student body and the school culture. Indeed, we conducted a study that showed that the ethnicity of a school's student body in student teaching correlates with the ethnicity of a school's student body in first teaching positions, independent of teacher ethnicity, thus affording us some support for our presupposition. We deemed it important for our predominantly middle-class white female students and teacher educators to become familiar with, and more invested in working with, black children and adolescents in low-income communities.

Some faculty members were more than willing to develop relationships with new schools and place their student teachers with potential mentors in those schools. These faculty members have already seen results – their student teachers have been hired in the schools where they did their student teaching. Nearly all of our alternative certification candidates were assigned to high-poverty, predominantly minority schools and most have remained in their schools.

Other faculty members were less sanguine about the quality of mentoring that cooperating teachers in struggling schools could afford their student teachers. After all, the field of teacher preparation has long espoused

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the value of apprenticeship with outstanding mentors, and teachers in challenging schools, however talented, would conceivably be less able to dedicate time to supporting a prospective teacher. It is nonetheless all too often the case that first-year teachers find themselves teaching in schools lacking what the Chicago Consortium on School Research calls "essential supports" for student learning. We speculate teachers without prior experience in similar settings – including during student teaching – are at increased risk of becoming attrition statistics.

ONE THING LEADS TO ANOTHER

Changing the venue for student teaching placements represents a small but powerful first step that immediately occasions other necessary actions. We recognized right away that our teacher preparation curricula had to be modified and strengthened to support our teacher candidates and the students we asked them to serve. For instance, whereas teachers' weak content knowledge can be masked in school districts where well-educated parents back up teachers at home, teachers in high-poverty schools must themselves possess exceptionally strong content knowledge and the ability to teach content at children's developmental levels. As a partial response to this demand, faculty have teamed up to develop a rigorous natural science sequence for prospective teachers.

Similarly, struggling schools often reside in struggling communities, where challenging classroom management situations are routinely triggered by students' anger-provoking and stressful life circumstances; beginning teachers frequently speak of culture shock. Our faculty are working across disciplines and differences to foster students' socio-emotional learning and development. We have also observed that, in our schools, both teacher and student actions are regularly interpreted differently as a function of race and class. University- and school-based mentors in our West Side partner schools have undertaken "courageous conversations" about differences between effective black and white teachers of black children, drawing on readings by Patricia Cooper, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and others.

We discovered some years ago that CPS graduates, our future Chicago resident-teachers, often did not make it into our undergraduate elementary program because they were stuck in remedial mathematics. Their numbers included nearly all of our African American students and a significant proportion of our Latino students. With further investigation, we learned that students typically exhibited what one faculty member termed "punctuated knowledge," where some concepts were understood well and others not. With the consent of the Mathematics Department, we created an alternative remedial mathematics course that afforded students differentiated instruction tailored to their personal needs, a course that has increased the number of CPS graduates who enter our program, and the number of black and Latino teachers who complete it.

Even as we hold our programs accountable to the needs of students who most need good teachers, we acknowledge that not all teacher candidates or all teacher educators will come on board. We need to continue to recruit and retain students and faculty who believe in the critical importance of this particular mission, including recruiting and retaining more students and faculty of colour. And, in our context, if we are serious about preparing teachers to teach where Chicago most needs them, then we must pay attention to the Chicago residency requirement for teachers and privilege teacher candidates who are Chicago residents or willing to become Chicago residents.

THROUGH A LOOKING-GLASS, BRIGHTLY

There is a world of difference between conducting "business as usual" and asking whether we are supplying effective teachers where they are most needed. It has been humbling to face the fact that, despite our most conscientious efforts, we ourselves have been part of the problem (or at least poor contributors to the solution) of leaving some children behind. While we still cannot say how effectively our teachers are supporting student learning, we're set on a qualitatively different course now. Every lesson we've learned on this path challenges previously-held assumptions and teaches us anew how much more we need to know and learn. And that cannot help but be good for the students we serve.

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