

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

A Revolution Begins in Teacher Prep By Jonathan Schorr

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A new generation of teacher education programs is challenging how teachers get trained for the classroom.

BY JONATHAN SCHORR

A Revolution Begins in Teacher Prep



of teacher training, you could do worse than to visit Samantha Patterson's kindergarten classroom at North Star Academy Charter School of Newark. On a blustery winter day in Newark, N.J., Patterson's students are clustered in three groups of about eight students each. One group is working independently on a set of computers that line a wall of the second-floor classroom. A second set is listening quietly while another teacher reads a story. But the real excitement surrounds the third group.

Their fire-engine-red chairs pulled up literally knee-to-knee with Patterson, the students are enraptured in a round of call-and-response practice aimed at teaching how vowel sounds blend. But it's not just verbal—it's a fast-moving, full-body experience with gestures for clues, launched by the teacher and echoed by the students in quick, joyful volleys. No one misses the action, not even for a moment. Experienced teachers with skills like

IF YOU WANT TO SEE THE FUTURE these are rare enough. For a first-year teacher to display such skills is exceptional. But for schools to get better, early-career teachers with strong skills are going to have to become a whole lot less exceptional.

Patterson may be emblematic of the coming change in teacher prep. In addition to her duties as a teacher, she's a student at Relay Graduate School of Education, which has become the leading symbol of a burgeoning revolution in how America is learning to teach. (NewSchools Venture Fund, where I work, supports Relay and other organizations named in this article; several years ago, while working at KIPP, I helped with an early draft of the plan that became Relay.) And although Patterson enjoys some remarkable natural gifts, much of what's on display in this lesson stems from training that's nearly as intensive as what she's doing with her students.

Indeed, a few steps behind the bright red chairs, Aja Settles watches Patterson work

ILLUSTRATION BY MAXWELL HOLYOKE-HIRSCH

with a practiced eye. “You can see she’s scanning—looking all the students in the eye,” says Settles, who is both principal at North Star and an adjunct professor at Relay. Scanning is one of three skills Ms. Patterson is working on, as part of a training program that departs sharply from the American norm.

Where much of teacher training is often criticized for being too removed from classroom realities, the Relay effort is decidedly practical. In one core element of Relay’s approach, Patterson videotapes her own teaching several times weekly; she brings the best of these video samples to Settles, and they review the tape like a player and coach training for a championship. Just now, Patterson is working to improve her “radars”—her skill in noticing what’s happening throughout the classroom—as well as her “cold-calling” of students, rather than just picking those with their hands raised. The intensive practice is “something I don’t think you’d get from another grad school program,” says Patterson. “There are some things that I’m doing way better than in August.”

The result of spreading that kind of training across a school, says Patterson, is a set of teachers who “demand 100 percent from 5-year-olds.” For Principal Settles, Relay is making a reality of what has long stood as a holy grail of teacher preparation: first-year teachers who, in practice and results, look more like veterans. “If I’d had Relay when I was learning to teach, I would have had much better understanding of strong practice,” Settles says. “I would have been better earlier.”

What’s Wrong with Teacher Training?

Helping teachers get better earlier is among the most pressing needs in American schooling—especially in places where schools are struggling. A mounting body of evidence demonstrates that strong teachers make a huge difference in educational outcomes for kids—and that much of the current approach to preparing them amounts to weak tea.

Today, nearly half of new teachers leave the profession within five years,¹ and surveys, such as the 2011 MetLife Teacher Survey,² show that teachers are unhappier in their jobs than they have been in decades. No one would claim that better training alone will fix all that—but it’s a crucial element. In a seminal 2006 study by Arthur Levine,³ more than three in five teachers said their training left them unprepared for the classroom—and principals agreed.

The solution, according to a growing cadre of innovative educators, is not incremental improvement on the traditional model, but an entirely new one. The new version springs not from the ivory tower, but from strong K-12 classrooms. In its clinical focus, it looks more like med school than ed school. Indeed, the new model recognizes teaching as a professional skill and craft, like medicine or law, and seeks to elevate it as a profession, in part through rigorous selection and training of candidates. Unlike the traditional model, the new wave of teacher preparation programs seeks to be held accountable for the results that teachers achieve in the classroom. And although these programs offer training that lasts far longer than Teach for America’s, they draw on some ideas of TFA and its progeny.

What’s wrong with our current model of teacher preparation? Consider the following points, all of which offer sharp contrasts between ed school and med school: Typically, teacher prep programs lack a feedback loop that informs their practice with the actual impact their trainees have on students in the classroom. They are not particularly selective on the way in. (Nearly half of teachers come from the bottom third of their college classes, with worse numbers for teachers in low-income neighborhoods.) Nor are they sufficiently selective on the way out. (Ed schools lack the tools and the mandate to screen out candidates who are ineffective teachers.) And although they specialize in pedagogy, ed schools put much of their energy into theory, at the cost of preparing teachers for the daily realities of the classroom.

“Most of the preparation continues to be theoretical in nature, provided by folks who have not been in the classroom for some time, so the coursework doesn’t feel especially relevant,” says Jason Kamras, the 2005 National Teacher of the Year who now leads the Office of Human Capital at the District of Columbia Public Schools. Kamras has been disappointed by the varying skills of teachers entering the school district, and in part blames the ed school curriculum: “They know who Dewey is, and they know Piaget ... but do they know how to teach reading, and how to apply those skills in a setting where kids are three or four levels behind? No.”

This shortfall should come as no surprise, because the people who run and teach in university-based training programs generally don’t see preparing teachers for those gritty realities as their main job. In a revealing 2010 Fordham Institute survey of education school professors,⁴ the large majority saw the main task as preparing future teachers “to be change agents who will reshape education,” whereas only about a quarter defined the chief task as preparing future teachers “to work effectively within the realities of today’s public schools.” Only 39 percent deemed it absolutely essential “to create teachers who are trained to address the challenges of high-need students in urban districts,” and an even smaller percentage saw it as vital to prepare teachers who can maintain discipline and order. Yet half of the professors surveyed agreed that “teacher education programs often fail to prepare teachers for the challenges of teaching in the real world.” Still, as Elizabeth Green noted in a 2010 *New York Times Magazine* piece, it hasn’t been enough for the academy to recognize it has a problem. Teacher prep leaders have made dramatic public statements acknowledging the problem several times over the last quarter century—but ed schools still leave many teachers unprepared for the day they face their own class for the first time.

So it went for April Stout, whose experience is painfully typical. Stout came to education in 2002 with her eyes open, following several stints volunteering, tutoring, and observing, while making ends meet as a nanny and personal chef. Looking to start a career in schools, she entered the education program at San Francisco State University, admired the quality of her professors and coursework, and felt ready to teach. She knew she would have plenty to learn when she stood in front of her own class for the first time, but she figured she had the foundation for a solid start. “I thought I could transition into it pretty smoothly,” she said.

Cut to her first year as a full-fledged teacher at Willow Oaks Elementary in the Ravenswood City School District, one of California’s toughest districts. For all her classes on supporting special-needs

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students, and her experience student-teaching a first-grade class, she was not ready for her own class of sixth-graders. “I didn’t have enough materials, I didn’t have the curriculum, and I didn’t have the skill set for the class that sat in front of me,” she says. “I went on total survival mode for the first six months of my career.”

“I would teach my class, and I would get through the day, and I would cry like a baby,” Stout recalls. “I felt like I was failing my kids.” Stout told herself she could solve the problem by working harder—but success remained out of reach, no matter how completely she sacrificed any semblance of balance in her life. “I worked 14- or 15-hour days,” she says. “I was not taking care of myself personally. When do you eat? When do you go to the bathroom?”

As often happens, Stout—after a very difficult first couple of years—eventually became a skillful teacher, a process she attributes to excellent mentorship. She now works as a mentor to new teachers herself, at the Santa Cruz, Calif.-based New Teacher Center. Yet, as she looks back, she knows she didn’t have what she needed at the beginning. The preparation she received at San Francisco State was valuable, she says—it just wasn’t practical enough to give her a successful start. Teaching, she remarks, is the only profession where a first-time practitioner is expected “to have the same skill set as a 10-year veteran.” For a new teacher, daily life can be a matter of countless routines and complex interactions—and mastering those realities can spell the difference between a year of productive learning and one of grinding chaos. Stout hadn’t learned that at San Francisco State. “I was really pedagogically smart and book smart,” she says, “but I wasn’t prepared for the things you have to negotiate as a teacher.”

If much of teacher preparation leans too heavily toward the theoretical, the roots of the problem run a century deep. Organized teacher preparation in the United States dates back to the 1830s—almost as far back as compulsory public schooling itself. As the American public school system took shape, independent institutions to prepare teachers, called “normal schools,” quickly sprang up as a way of ensuring quality instruction. Yet, to stay competitive, the normal schools were forced to broaden their offerings to more closely resemble liberal arts colleges—and by the 1920s were calling themselves “teachers’ colleges.” As Stanford University School of Education Professor David Labaree writes, “This process of institutional evolution reached its culmination in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, when one after another of these former normal schools took the last step by seeking and winning the title ‘university.’”²⁵ Meanwhile, established universities got into the act, creating education chairs. Both trends created a durable (and often lucrative) teacher preparation industry in the provinces of higher education—but one that, increasingly, bore the trappings of a research institution, whose vitality stems from theory, not practice.

The new generation of teacher prep programs offer new solutions to an old problem and are committed not to fixing schools of ed, but to reinventing them. Most emerge not from universities, but from autonomous, typically nonprofit organizations. They move the locus of much of their training to the school building, aiming to be more practical and clinical in approach than their traditional forebears. Yet this approach—termed “professional practice teacher preparation”—is far from a return to the technical, vocational approach that characterized teacher preparation a century ago.

This new generation aims to raise the stature of teaching as craft and art, even as it raises standards of excellence for admission, graduation, and performance. Indeed, the focus on performance is a vital innovation; these programs are committed to building a feedback loop that makes them accountable for the classroom performance of the teachers they train, and often withhold graduation or certification from teachers who have not demonstrated competence. They look toward a day when school systems can make hiring decisions based on a candidate’s classroom record, and on the record of the preparation program for training highly effective teachers. And, thanks to their close connection to classrooms, these programs will be well positioned to prepare teachers for a rapidly changing, increasingly technologically enabled learning model over the coming decade. A handful, like Relay, are primarily focused (at least initially) on training teachers for strong public charter schools, while others serve teachers headed to district schools.

What’s not new here is the notion of alternative paths to traditional teacher preparation; “alt prep” began gaining steam almost 30 years ago. The term describes a wide range of efforts to increase the quality, quantity, and variety of pathways into teaching, ranging from programs focusing on math and science specialists to the federal “troops to teachers” program. None, however, has garnered the attention of TFA, which recruited its first corps in 1990. (I was part of that initial corps, and more recently have done work in support of TFA’s communications efforts.) TFA has done much to change the national conversation about teacher preparation. Much of that public attention has focused on the enormous numbers of graduates of elite colleges who apply, but a potentially more important impact has received less attention: TFA’s focus on student achievement, typically as measured by gains in test scores. That focus is fundamental to a new generation of teacher preparation programs that are eager to be held accountable for their results. TFA’s alumni have gone on to build programs that take this focus further, most crucially through the New Teacher Project, which has done pioneering work on teacher effectiveness in Tennessee and Louisiana.

The new generation also includes a raft of small, autonomous organizations that share an entrepreneurial mindset, and are either based in or closely connected to a set of strong schools; among these are the Boston Teacher Residency, the Academy for Urban School Leadership (Chicago), and programs operated by the Aspire, Success, and YES Prep charter networks. Most of these programs work with teacher candidates for a year or longer, in contrast to the five weeks offered by the TFA training, and some are seen as complementary to the TFA training. Yet not all are startups. Some of the most prestigious university-based teacher preparation programs are moving toward a performance-based model with feedback and accountability attached to the results teachers receive in the classroom; among these are the University of Michigan, Stanford University, the University of Southern California, and Johns Hopkins University.

Enter the Innovators

Back in Newark, it’s 5:30 p.m. on that same winter day, and Patterson takes a seat in her Relay Graduate School of Education class. There are 26 graduate students—Relay’s term for teachers in training—in the windowless room. Tonight’s unit is CC-114, Application of Procedures.

The title sounds like an antidote for the worst sort of insomnia, and in fact it's one of the least exciting topics of the Relay curriculum—but it's precisely the sort of thing Stout wishes she had learned before she entered the classroom. It's also reflective of the astonishingly practical approach that Relay takes to preparing teachers.

The evening starts with a “do-now” reading about routines, which gives way to a discussion about productivity. (Five minutes wasted each day on sloppy routines translates into 21 lost class periods each year.) Together, the teachers watch and discuss a video of a 42-second transition between activities in an elementary school classroom, followed by another called “Passing Back Papers.” In groups, the graduate students compare notes on how they have designated spots for their students at desks and on the reading carpet, and consider whether they have promoted order or its opposite.

As unusual as this class would seem at a traditional school of education, it is arguably the most traditional element of the Relay program. Only a portion of the instruction takes place in a class setting; much of it involves readings and internally produced videos stored on Relay's expansive online system. An additional component is coaching of the sort that Patterson got from Principal Settles, whether from live observation in class or from videos Patterson made of herself teaching. Together, they combine into a program that differs markedly in how its students spend their time—and in what's required of them.

Last year Relay became the first such program in New York state to be recognized as a freestanding institution of higher education. Its graduation requirements are unique: measurable student outcomes make up half of the points required for graduation; the remainder come from successful completion of course “modules,” classroom observations, and the candidate's defense of her master's thesis. The program is designed to take two years, but Relay encourages students to proceed through it “as fast as you can, but as slow as you must.” Contrast that to typical ed programs, where success depends on mostly receiving passing grades during a program of set length, and where the institutions that train teachers are unlikely ever to receive any information about their impact on children.

Delivering Evaluated Teachers

Tim Knowles believes the United States desperately needs an alternative to the dominant training model, through which 90 percent of teachers enter the classroom today. Knowles knows the world of university-based preparation programs from the inside; he runs the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute, which houses the University of Chicago Urban Teacher Education Program. Yet he's not shy about lobbing grenades at the ivory tower.

“Higher ed teacher prep is a cartel,” Knowles says. “It doesn't have much in the way of competition. It's not transparent, and it's not accountable for what it delivers.” He ticks off the quarter century of reports ringing alarms about the inadequacy of teacher preparation, and adds, “We can safely say that we've got a pretty broken system if you've got a thousand teachers leaving the profession every day for other professions. We've clearly built a system that isn't delivering enough good teachers that stay in the places we need them most.” Knowles, who also has served as deputy superintendent in the Boston Public Schools, sees the new generation of teacher preparation programs as a welcome force on the horizon. He says they bring two

crucial innovations: The programs take an urgent interest in teachers' impact on student learning, and they offer a hands-on, clinical approach to developing teachers' skills.

Although the new programs and organizations are far from identical, they share enough characteristics to give them a family resemblance. They come in different packages—entrepreneurial startup organizations, school-based alternative certification programs, and paradigm-busting initiatives based in university schools of education. What they share, however, is a set of common beliefs about what it will take to reinvent teacher preparation.

As a group, these programs and organizations build on the understanding that no school-based factor matters as much in student outcomes as the skill of the teacher. That's why we have to help teachers get good faster, so they are not learning to teach at the expense of their first couple of years of students—or quitting out of burnout and frustration. They also build on the understanding—highlighted in Malcolm Gladwell's intriguing comparison of teachers and quarterbacks in a 2008 *New Yorker* article—that we are not very good at figuring out in advance who will be a good teacher, so we need to give candidates a chance to prove themselves. These programs react quickly to who is, or is not, demonstrating effectiveness in the classroom. Many are prepared to guarantee the classroom effectiveness of their teachers—because they graduate only teachers who have demonstrated that they can drive student learning.

Here are some of the important features that characterize much of this new class of organizations:

The emphasis is on practice | Much of the learning takes place in real schools. The programs look constantly and seriously at data in coaching teachers and in determining their progress. Theory still informs the program deeply—but it's less direct. Jean Piaget's ideas, for example, may inform program design, but students are unlikely to closely study, discuss, and write about those ideas. (Critics of this new generation of teacher prep, such as Diane Ravitch,⁶ have taken aim at the lack of specific courses in more theoretical disciplines.) Yet these are not vocational programs—on the contrary, they aim to raise the status of teaching as a profession of intellectual skill, not a technical one.

Accomplished teachers serve as models, coaches, and mentors | For the instructors of these incipient teachers, cachet comes from current or very recent accomplishments in the classroom—not from a beefy list of research publications. Many of these programs call themselves residencies, modeled on the training of physicians—meaning lots of opportunities to observe, and then practice, in real-life situations under the tutelage of an accomplished veteran.

Progress and success in the program are dependent on performance in the classroom | Professional practice-based programs often tie completion—and diplomas or credentials—to the success teachers have in the classroom, based on test scores as well as observations and other data. This seemingly common-sense approach represents one of the most revolutionary elements of these programs. Both teachers and the program as a whole expect to be held accountable for student achievement, and most programs anticipate that the least

successful candidate teachers will be counseled to exit the program and the profession.

Rigor matters | Mike Goldstein, the former journalist who founded Boston's Match Teacher Residency, says the new class of teacher preparation programs stands out for pushing teachers vastly harder than typical programs do. "Few people would describe their preparation for teaching as the hardest thing they've ever done," he says. "Many would say their rookie year of teaching is the hardest thing they've done."

The Road Ahead

It is far too soon to call these programs a success, or to talk about what practices are working best. And even when the data come, it will be hard to make comparisons, because more traditional teacher ed programs aren't keeping score. But that may be rapidly changing. Louisiana and Tennessee have pioneered systems to track ed student data; both states have publicly disclosed the performance of graduates from teacher preparation programs since 2007 and 2008, respectively. By 2016, 12 other states will have joined Louisiana and Tennessee in reporting performance. Although these early reports will include some imperfect data, they will provide an unprecedented degree of transparency about the field. Already, we know that in Louisiana, teachers prepared by the New Teacher Project consistently outperform graduates of other programs.

Norman Atkins, Relay's president, hopes that in three to four years, the data from his organization and others will deliver a "knock-out punch" for performance-based programs. Knowles hopes the competition starts soon, because he believes competitive pressure will improve teacher preparation. "From a policy perspective and a philanthropic perspective, we can spur a much higher degree of innovation," he says.

But will this new generation of programs actually bring transformational change to the field? As chancellor of the 23-campus California State University, Barry Munitz oversaw a system that prepares about 60 percent of the teachers in the state and 12 percent of the teachers in the country. (I took teacher prep courses at California State University, Los Angeles on his watch.) Munitz is optimistic about the potential of these new teacher prep organizations to spark change—but argues the training itself is only part of what we need to get right. Like many of the startup revolutionaries, Munitz says improved training must be part of an overall move to bring a new professionalism to teaching—starting with recruiting outstanding candidates. In addition, he argues that teacher salaries must reflect the real value of teaching to society, in an age when well-educated, ambitious young women—once forced into low-paying teaching jobs by limited career opportunities—now have a world of choices. "We have to make the teaching profession an attractive, prestigious, and therefore well-paid position," he says. Innovative teacher prep faces a substantial list of problems, Munitz says, that must be solved "on an emergency basis."

Nonetheless, he believes the new generation of teacher prep organizations may put pressure on much larger systems to do business differently—even if these organizations themselves don't quickly come to enroll big numbers of teachers. "It could have a significant effect on the way a significant number of teachers are prepared," he says. "We can derive lessons ... and inject them into the larger programs."

Levine, now president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, agrees that the push for accountability for ed schools is unstoppable. But that doesn't mean the future shape of teacher education is set. "The notion of focusing on learning, accountability, data—all that's here to stay," he says. "It's not going away. It's not a fad. ... The question is, what's the institution going to look like when we get there?"

Levine sits on the Relay board and expects to see new teacher training organizations increasingly following its model. But he wonders whether new institutions will result in the closure of less effective older programs—or whether they will simply supplement them. "We're trying to fix broken social institutions and simultaneously replace them," Levine says. He hopes that ineffective older programs will close, and that the funds that support them will move to newer and more effective institutions. "Bad programs need to disappear," he says.

None of that is to say that universities aren't part of the solution. Levine notes that a few university-based programs have taken the innovation initiative with enthusiasm, among them the University of Indianapolis and the University of Washington. But, he says, it takes fierce commitment: "It's not going to happen by serendipity."

Part of the issue is that policies that would allow this new class of program to exist are in their infancy. (One such bill, the GREAT [Growing Excellent Achievement Training Academies] Teachers and Principals Act, has been introduced in the US House and Senate.) It took years for Relay to win its status as an independent institution of higher education—the first new one in decades in New York. If traditional higher education institutions feel threatened by these upstarts, they may act to make it harder for new ones to get started and to grow.

Yet if this new generation of teacher prep institutions flourishes, the benefits are exciting to contemplate. For our school systems, it would mean, for the first time, the ability to hire teachers on the basis of their demonstrated skill—from programs based on their record. For training programs, a feedback loop from the classroom would allow new understanding of what it means to teach well, and of how to help early-career teachers attain those skills. For teachers, it would mean shortening or eliminating the grueling early experiences that drive so many of them from the profession. And for schools and students, a faster path to skilled teaching could create a generation of teachers who don't spend two, three, or five years offering mixed value to students as they learn on the job. Teachers, arguably, have the most important job in the United States, yet we do a lousy job of helping them learn to teach. We can do better. ■

Notes

- 1 Pam Grossman, "We Need Experienced Teachers," *The Huffington Post*, April 23, 2012.
- 2 The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Teachers, Parents, and the Economy, 2011. <https://www.metlife.com/assets/cao/contributions/foundation/american-teacher/MetLife-Teacher-Survey-2011.pdf>
- 3 Arthur Levine, "Educating School Teachers," The Education Schools Project, 2006. http://www.edschools.org/pdf/Educating_Teachers_Report.pdf
- 4 Steve Farkas & Ann Duffett, "Cracks in the Ivory Tower? The Views of Education Professors Circa 2010," Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2010.
- 5 David Labaree, "An Uneasy Relationship: The History of Teacher Education in the University," *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education: Enduring Questions in Changing Contexts* (third edition), Association of Teacher Educators, 2008.
- 6 Diane Ravitch, "Is This a Real Graduate School of Education?" dianeravitch.net, July 12, 2012.