The preparation of tomorrow's reading teachers

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The need for highly competent teachers is more critical now than at any other time in history. Today's world is a rapidly changing economic environment, and high school graduates need highly refined skills to be successful in the work force: strong communication skills, technological savvy, comfort with ambiguity, and the ability to tackle problems from unique perspectives. In the United States, teachers are not only challenged with teaching, but must also face classrooms that are more diverse than ever before. Students come from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds as well as achievement levels, and many of them live in poverty or substandard conditions. Today's elementary class rooms include children with several different first languages and a wide variety of physical, emotional, and learning problems. Experts agree that teachers are the most influential factor in determining student success. Teachers, especially reading teachers, must be very clear about the skills their students require and be able to meet their students' diverse learning needs. There have been increased calls in the U.S. for innovative teacher preparation to meet the growing demand for high-quality teachers for an increasingly diverse student population. Many colleges and universities have met this challenge with sweeping changes in their teacher preparation programs. In addition, in an effort to deal with the shortage of teachers, many states are adopting alternative pathways to teacher licensure. There is renewed emphasis on the professional development of inservice teachers, and teachers seeking advanced licensure are encouraged to acquire national board certification or engage in some other inquiry-based line of professional development.

Recent trends

In future issues of this column I will explore some recent trends in teacher certification and professional development and the impact they have had on literacy instruction in schools. Bringing focus and urgency to the topic is the call from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) to improve the teacher work force by addressing five broad areas.

- Implement standards for students and teachers,
- Reinvent teacher preparation,
- Overhaul teacher recruitment,
- Encourage and reward knowledge and skill, and
- Organize schools for success.

Taken together, these recommendations argue for a multifaceted approach to meet the demand for high-quality teachers. Among the recommendations from the commission are new approaches to teacher-preparation programs, high quality alternative pathways to teaching, and rewards for highly successful career teachers. In some reinvented teacher-preparation

programs, public schools and universities work collaboratively at simultaneous renewal. In ever increasing numbers, professional development schools are aiming to improve education at all levels, from preschool to university settings. To accomplish this goal, many teacher preparation programs require preservice teachers to do extensive, meaningful work in actual classroom settings throughout their programs of study. Universities are incorporating more substantive and longer lasting field experiences in their teacher-preparation programs, many of which include year long internships. The nature of course work and field experience for preservice teachers is also changing and often includes inquiry-based experiences that require preservice teachers to critically examine their own teaching. With the growing popularity of professional-development schools and partnerships between schools and universities, questions regarding their impact have arisen. How does involvement in professional development schools change the face of reading teacher education? How are these settings preparing teachers, both preservice and inservice, to meet the diverse learning needs of their students? How does involvement in a school and university partnership affect the way teachers approach literacy instruction? What are the literacy experiences of their students? What are the outcomes of these literacy experiences for the teachers, students, and schools?

Alternative pathways

Another recent trend to meet the de mand for more teachers is alternative pathways to licensure. Alternative path ways to licensure have been met with controversy and challenges. The primary obstacle has been the challenge of developing alternative programs that meet the same high-quality standards of university teacher-preparation programs. Because these programs are at tractive to a variety of individuals (professionals seeking career changes, recent college graduates, and others), the desire to enter the workforce quick ly is paramount. Therefore, alternative licensure programs have emphasized quick entry into the classroom with ad joining studies of pedagogy. Again, questions have emerged. What impact have these programs had on teachers' effectiveness at teaching reading? What is the nature of the literacy experiences they provide their students? What overall effect have alternative pathways to licensure had on students' literacy development?

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is making an effort to reward successful and career teachers as well as to address their professional development. This board advocates a portfolio process for inservice teachers to engage them in self-reflection. The process requires teachers to collect evidence of their teaching and analyze this data and assess its impact on student achievement. The portfolio process, typically taking up to a year to complete, has affected teachers in a variety of ways. Of particular interest is how the certification process has altered teachers' choices and decisions regarding literacy instruction. Questioned are the ways the certification process influences teachers' understanding of literacy development and how this understanding translates to student achievement and the types of literacy activities experienced in classrooms.

Action research and teacher study groups are at the center of many of these innovations in teacher certification and professional development. Teacher study groups are formed to engage teachers in an exploration of their teaching. Often, they investigate a specific aspect of teaching. In these instances, action research is conducted as a means of collecting data to analyze the effects of teaching strategies. Other times, teachers participate in study groups to learn more about a particular methodology, strategy, or innovation. Both practices, action research and study groups, have the potential to greatly affect how teachers teach reading. Questions that have arisen include how these lines of inquiry have affect ed schools, how they have influenced school environments and teachers' propensity to critically examine their practices, and what impact they have in promoting teachers' skills in teaching reading to diverse learners.

Teacher certification today is undergoing sweeping changes. Approaches to it incorporate many of the recommendations from the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996). Among those are teacher preparation programs that involve professional development schools, alternative pathways to teaching, nation al board certification, action research, and teacher study groups. Subsequent to implementing these innovations in teacher certification are changes in the ways teachers teach reading to young children. How will literacy instruction in today's and tomorrow's classrooms adapt to reflect the changing demo graphics in student populations? What lasting effects will result from these practices? Future columns in the Trends in Teacher Certification and Literacy department will bring these issues to light and will explore the implications of these innovations for children's literacy development. The success of tomorrow's workforce is dependent upon the success of today's classrooms. Now, more than ever, we must ensure that teachers are equipped with the necessary skills and understandings to meet the literacy needs of all children.

Reference

National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996). *What matters most: Teaching for America's Future.* New York: Author.