by Lorna Collier

Successes in English Teacher Preparation

Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers—What Are the Best Practices?

The six-year-old in Jennifer Rieck's first-grade class at Field Park Elementary School in Western Springs, Illinois, was having a hard time dealing with his parents' divorce. His reading suffered, and he talked frequently about his father leaving, which frightened the other children.

It was a situation Rieck, a fourth-year teacher, hadn't learned how to handle in her education courses at Elmhurst College (Illinois)—but she was still able to turn to her alma mater for support, the school's monthly alumni mentor group, comprising fellow teachers and faculty. Rieck took the group's suggestion and began having the child write letters to his father as a way both to boost his literacy skills and work through the emotions surrounding the divorce.

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Providing free, post-graduation support for new teachers is one approach taken by Elmhurst College to help keep its graduates in the profession. Between thirty and fifty percent of new teachers leave the profession within five years, according to studies reviewed by the NEA (The High Cost of Teacher Turnover, http://www.nctaf.org/resources/research_and_reports/nctaf_research_reports/documents/NCTAFCostofTeacherTurnover.pdf) and it's widely believed that post-graduate support is one key to improving retention.

The six-year-old Elmhurst program lets teachers find answers to concerns that sometimes can't be anticipated in a degree program, no matter how thoroughly conceived, and helps stressed, novice teachers find solace in sharing problems with others in similar situations. The program is also an example of the focus on mentoring often found in top-notch education programs.

Successful teacher education programs share other characteristics as well; here's a look at how some of these best practices are contributing to teacher education today, with a glimpse at some of the challenges schools face in implementing effective teacher preparation programs.

Getting Into the Field—Early and Often

Giving students a wide array of field experiences that immerse them in different classroom settings, grade levels, and schools is recognized by many as an essential element in a good teacher education program.

At California State University at Northridge (CSUN), education students put in a full year of scaffolded, supported student teaching, in addition to a variety of school-based assignments in other classes, says Bonnie Ericson, chair of the Department of Secondary Education.

During the first semester of student teaching, students work up to teaching by first observing, then co-teaching, then teaching a single course. The second semester is a full, semester-track teaching experience, from lesson planning to grading to meeting with parents; students teach three classes from the first day to the last day of the semester.

"One of the pieces of feedback we get from our candidates is that they like the length of those experiences," says Ericson. "There are shorter programs in the area, but the schools like to hire our candidates, who have had this extensive, closely guided experience."

Students are taught by faculty with significant classroom teaching experience and expertise in subject areas (including English specialists). "Everybody has at least five to six years in high school classes before coming to CSUN," says Kathleen Rowlands, associate professor and director of the CSUN Writing Project, who has more than 20 years of classroom experience in English.

Similarly, faculty at Elmhurst College are required to have had classroom teaching experience, while students

are required to do about 100 hours of field experiences prior to beginning student teaching.

"They get into the field on day one," says Judy Fiene, director of the elementary education program. "The very first class they are out in the field, not only observing but reflecting. We're getting them to think about why the teacher is doing what he or she is doing."

Sometimes field experiences can help students discover they're on the wrong track.

"I have a sophomore right now who is taking one of the beginning classes I teach," says Lisa Burke, assistant professor in the special education program. "He came up to me and said, 'You know what? I've been observing in these classes and I realized I really don't want to be a teacher.' He's got time to change his major without having to add another two years to his college experience."

While early field experiences prior to student teaching are "really important," they can be difficult for resource-strapped institutions to provide, says Janet Alsup, past chair of the NCTE Conference on English Education, and associate professor of English education at Purdue University.

"At Purdue, we're always trying to [arrange more field experiences], but it's really hard because the local schools are overwhelmed trying to get students placed, and you need faculty and staff to supervise them."

Student-teaching placements are becoming more difficult as well, given the emphasis on test scores by school districts.

"There's a lot of uneasiness over making student teacher placements right now because of pressure on raising test scores in the schools," says Ericson. "The principals of the schools are afraid a student teacher might bring down test scores for the school. We are in the process of collecting some student teaching data for teachers at a school, with and without a student teacher, to share with principals."

Sandra DaLie, who places student teachers for CSUN and works as a literacy coach at Northridge Academy (a charter high school on the campus of CSUN), says the university is dealing with the challenge "on a department-by-department basis, and in some cases a teacher-by-teacher basis. Some departments don't want to accept student teachers in the spring semester when heavy-duty testing happens."

Integrating 21st Century Technologies

Technology should be infused throughout teacher education programs, says Troy Hicks, assistant professor of English at Central Michigan University, East Lansing. It's important to give students "genuine opportunities to be critical consumers of different types of technologies and be creative in the ways the technology can prepare them for teaching."

It's reported that one third to one half of new teachers leave the profession within five years. By focusing on innovative ways to support graduates even after they enter the teaching field, successful teacher ed programs may be able to combat this trend.

A classroom with technology integration, says Hicks, might include students bringing in mobile devices or laptops; being engaged in collaborative processes using Web-based tools; and using relevant software (such as graphing tools for math courses). "If they are in English classrooms, they should be actually writing, reading, and responding to each others' writing" via technology.

One simple English writing exercise Hicks uses involves non-Web-based technology. Students type a draft of a paper using a word processing program, then use tools to highlight sentence structure and word choice. Students double-space between sentences, highlight beginning words of sentences in different colors depending on how often the student uses the same word, and similarly call out sentence length and verb choice.

The strategy uses the word processor in ways "other than just sitting in front of it, typing—but doing some very simple moves to help you literally see your writing and think about the revision process."

Unfortunately, many schools don't yet incorporate technology effectively in the context of teaching, says Hicks. "Some teacher education courses are taking a very thoughtful and thorough approach to integrating technology, and some are doing it piecemeal. . . . Sadly, I think it's

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a little more hit-or-miss than what we'd like to believe."

Road blocks include excessive Internet filtering that locks down computers; lack of access to equipment; and faculty who don't feel confident in their tech skills (plus don't have time to learn them).

Alsup notes there are "pockets" where technology integration is happening, but also "there are plenty of people like me who are struggling with how to teach 21st century literacies or technological literacies in ways that are useful for teaching our content. . . . I think [we're] getting there, but we still need to keep working on it."

Mentorship and Support

Successful mentoring relationships can have a profound effect on a teacher-to-be. "I do think it's one-on-one relationships that can make or break teachers," says Hicks.

Teacher education programs use mentoring in various ways—from informal relationships with supportive faculty to assigned mentors in classrooms.

At Elmhurst College, students are encouraged to seek out mentors from the beginning of their programs, says Judy Fiene. These can include faculty members as well as teachers in schools in which they have field experiences.

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"With early fieldwork, it's more usual than not that our students will get a mentor teacher who will turn into the cooperating teacher once they start student-teaching," says Fiene. This relationship can build for a year prior to student-teaching. "It helps that students are not thrown into a student-teaching classroom without already having developed a relationship with that teacher."

While student-teaching, students often are mentored both by their supervising classroom teacher as well as college/university supervisors.

CSUN students come back to campus every other week for seminars about their classrooms. Rowlands says these seminars used to be organized by subject area. "Now they've gotten mixed a little more, partly because we want to give the message that literacy is across the content areas—the new Common Core standards are saying that." The seminars work to help "both experienced teachers and new credential candidates with teaching reading and writing in their content areas."

Advanced students also can serve as mentors, says Fiene. At Elmhurst, students participate in several presentations during the program in which they refine their teaching philosophies. Pre-clinical teacher trainees (those who haven't begun student-teaching yet) attend presentations and often receive advice from students further along in the program.

"The student teachers become mentors for the pre-clinicals," says Fiene. "They start saying to them, 'Here's what you might want to watch out for . . . and they start talking to them like they are their mentees."

Becoming Reflective Practitioners & Problem-Solvers

"It's important once you start working independently that you not only have practical knowledge of activities and lessons, but that you understand the big picture—why you are doing it and how the lessons and activities fit together over time," says Alsup.

Fiene says students are taught to think like "reflective practitioners." In one pre-student-teaching course, students "come in and ponder questions in the same way teachers do: 'How do I handle a child like this?' 'What do I do when I have this type of issue?'"

This helps students begin thinking in problem-solving, strategic ways. "By the time they are in their first teaching job, they are no strangers to being reflective and talking about issues . . . and talking to other professionals to make it easier."

The mentorship, support programs, and beneficial strategies offered by good teacher ed programs serve to combat—but can't totally counteract—an unfortunate reality of teacher preparation: the fact that new teachers often find it difficult to retain a sense of higher purpose once they inhabit real-world classrooms.

Susi Long, coauthor of *Tensions and Triumphs in the Early Years of Teaching: Real-World Findings and Advice for Supporting New Teachers* (NCTE, 2006), notes that the new teachers who coauthored *Tensions and Triumphs* were frustrated by lack of autonomy and the absence of visionaries as they struggled to hold on to their teaching ideals.

One new teacher wrote: "When you find yourself in a school that hates the very meaning of change, it becomes easier and easier to give in to the pressure to conform. Before you know it, the person you once were, full of hope and energy, slowly disappears."

These teachers, says Long, "felt that the preservice program should have done a better job of helping them understand how to teach within mandates without compromising their visions of great teaching."

Diversity Training and Awareness

Long cites diversity training as another component needed for the most effective teacher preparation.

Research shows that new teachers "feel that they enter

Regular opportunities for conversations with other new teachers and with more experienced instructors give new graduates a supportive environment in which to gain advice on matters ranging from classroom management and problems with administrators to working with support staff and parents.

the profession with limited understandings about how to support students from backgrounds different from their own," says Long, a professor of early childhood and language and literacy at the University of South Carolina. "Statistics also show that we continue to serve African American and Latino/Latina children least well."

Long believes teacher education programs "should include an explicit and in-depth focus on cultural and linguistic diversity."

Danielle L. Apugo, a first-year ELA teacher at Rusheon Middle School, Bossier City, Louisiana, and a 2010 recipient of an NCTE Early Career Educator of Color Leadership Award, agrees that emphasizing cultural and linguistic diversity during teacher preparation is "essential."

"I'm an avid believer," says Apugo, "in preparing future educators for what to expect within their own classroom settings." She suggests that by offering "a rich integration of multicultural field experiences for their students," teacher education programs can "ensure their graduates will be well versed in meeting [students'] needs."

Additional emphasis should be given, Long says, to "culturally relevant pedagogies that address educational inequities. It also seems clear that we need to incorporate issues discussed even less frequently in teacher education programs—including sexual orientation and the education of students who are differently able."

Providing Post-Graduate Support

At Elmhurst College about 60 alums meet monthly in groups depending on their field. Groups are led by the directors of those programs and sometimes include faculty guests with information about developments in the field.

"The group gives [teachers] a place where they can come back and say, 'You know, I don't really know what to do in this situation,'" says Therese Wehman, program director for early childhood education. Because the teachers aren't on the job—aren't being judged or rated—they can feel free to be honest.

Teachers often talk about nitty-gritty matters: classroom management, problems with administrators, and how to work with other adults, such as support staff and parents.

For example, Maureen Toby, a second-year early childhood special education teacher in Naperville, Illinois, says she faced a problem coordinating her classroom role with that of nurses, teaching assistants, and related service professionals. "It was difficult for me, because I was the new teacher trying to learn from them" while at the same time charged with directing the care of her students. The alumni in her group helped her define her role.

Tammy Licata is another special education master's graduate from Elmhurst who attends the alumni support group. Licata, who works as a developmental therapist providing early intervention programming for infants, says the group is "so, so valuable. Professor Wehman knows what's going on in the field and keeps us updated.

Licata says the contact with colleagues is "especially important" to her because she works independently. "I've brought up situations I've encountered [and] have found they are encountering the same kinds of things. It's a really important part of my development. I don't think I've missed [an alumni meeting] yet."

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At the end of each group, participants are assessed, says Lisa Burke, a former group leader. "We've received strong feedback showing that the group was successful in terms of retaining teachers and allowing them to vent and feel like they aren't alone, which then hopefully transmits to, 'I'll stay in this field.'"

Unfortunately, most schools don't offer this type of post-graduate follow-up and support, says Alsup. "My sense is that [when students graduate] they are kind of 'out.' We as teacher education institutions don't do as well in this area as we could."

Some ways that schools offer post-graduate support include faculty members maintaining websites or wikis with class resources that students can—and do—visit for years after graduation, as well as participating in ongoing email or listserv contact with graduates. At schools with National Writing Project sites, teachers who have been in the field for at least three years can participate in local programs and gain another valuable means of professional connection.

For early career teacher Jennifer Rieck, the alumni support group at Elmhurst College provides her with both the chance to be a mentee and a mentor. In her fourth year, she's one of the more experienced in a group aimed at novices.

Rieck says she gets "great ideas," advice, and support from others in the group. "It's a really nice resource to have."

At the same time, she finds it rewarding "that I can help people talk about it."

"That first year as a teacher is so difficult," she says.

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