

FROM TEACHER TO STUDENT

THE VALUE OF TEACHER EDUCATION FOR EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

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This study considers the usefulness of formal teacher preparation for those with prior teaching experience. We examine the experiences of STEP (Stanford Teacher Education Program) graduates who had significant classroom teaching experience prior to entering STEP. Five themes emerge as central to the learning of these experienced teachers during their STEP year: a greater awareness of the students in their classes who are struggling academically and how to help them; a broader and more complex understanding of curriculum planning; the importance of collegiality and collaboration in professional life; the value of feedback and structured reflection; and theoretical frameworks of education that enhanced both pedagogy and appreciation for broader educational issues outside the classroom. The comments of these STEP graduates reveal their strong support of a comprehensive training experience that recognizes the value of classroom experience but situates it in an intellectually rigorous context of reflection, feedback, and collaboration.

Keywords: *teacher education; preservice; reflection; collegiality; pedagogy; experience*

Very little research exists on the experiences of those who enter formal teacher preparation programs after already having taught in their own classrooms. Numerous studies have compared the experiences of novice teachers with veteran teachers (Carter, Cushing, Sabers, Stein, & Berliner, 1988; Fogarty, 1983; Korevaar & Bergen, 1992; Levin, 1995; Martin & Baldwin, 1992; Pettigrew & Buell, 1987; Strahan, 1989), and several have compared the experiences of credentialed teachers with those who either earned alternative certification or none at all (Martin & Shoho, 1999; Miller, McKenna, & McKenna, 1998; Shoho & Martin, 1999; Stoddart & Floden, 1995; Turley & Nakai, 2000). Although a comparison of alternative and tradi-

tional credentialing routes seems an important avenue of inquiry, these studies compared the experiences of *different* individuals; some of the teachers completed traditional teacher training programs, and others did not. By exploring the perceptions of the *same* individuals—reflections on their prelicensure and postlicensure teaching—this study seeks to offer a new perspective on the efficacy and value of formal teacher preparation. What vital learning provided by formal preparation do teachers perceive were unavailable to them through classroom teaching experience? Given teachers' tendency to claim that "firsthand experience" in the classroom provided most of their professional knowledge (Buchmann & Schwille, 1983), and the growing

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popularity of fast track or emergency credential pathways, it seems useful to consider what elements of formal teacher preparation might be missing from experience alone.

METHOD OF INQUIRY AND ANALYSIS

The Stanford Teacher Education Program (STEP) is a 12-month postbaccalaureate experience resulting in a California Professional Clear Single Subject Teaching Credential with CLAD (Crosscultural, Language, and Academic Development) certification, plus a master of arts in education. Participants complete a full year of student teaching and 45 credits of graduate coursework and enjoy regular access to university faculty, internship supervisors, and cooperating teachers. We identified 27 STEP graduates from the past 2 years of the program who had significant teaching experience prior to entering the program. We defined this as having been responsible for classroom planning, teaching, and management for the equivalent of at least one academic semester. Experience ranged from those who had taught 5 years independently to one who had served as a long-term substitute on several occasions, with the overall average teaching experience measuring just over 2 years of full-time, independent classroom teaching. Of the 128 STEP graduates from 1999 and 2000, 21% were thus identified as experienced, and we were able to contact all but 4 for the interview study. Of these 23 interviewed, nearly 90% were Caucasian and nearly 80% female, with a median age of 27. Although some of those interviewed participated in sporadic professional development opportunities during their pre-STEP teaching, only 6 received any sort of organized, sustained pedagogical training prior to teaching. The most in-depth of these was a 3-month Peace Corps orientation to teaching English abroad.

A semistructured interview protocol involving fixed question and variable follow-up probes was used; audiotaped interviews lasted an average of 75 minutes. Primary areas of inquiry included teachers' perspectives on the following: (a) their teaching experience prior to STEP and any training they might have had, (b) their year of STEP study (intensive classwork

and 9-month student teaching), and (c) for 1999 graduates, their first year back in their own classroom since graduating from Stanford. Among the approximately 60 fixed questions, teachers were asked to reflect on specifics of their professional practice before and after STEP, motivations for teaching and returning for formal preparation, significant learning experiences during STEP (particularly in relation to changes in practice and perspective), and shortcomings of their program experience.

Analysis of transcripts involved an iterative process in which teachers' statements were grouped into 34 categories based on interview questions. These ranged from comments about specific courses and learning experiences (e.g., student teaching, yearlong academic projects) to reflections on their own professional strengths and weaknesses before and after STEP, to pedagogical considerations such as assessment, classroom management and environment, and curriculum development. A process of conceptual clustering and open coding was then employed (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to generate a series of potential themes related specifically to learning experiences during the STEP year that teachers described as significant to their development as practitioners, and the degree to which teachers felt these experiences had been available from their previous teaching experiences alone. Consensual validity was sought through discussion with other program researchers familiar with the data, and a recursive process of coding adjustments followed in the form of additions and deletions.

The limitations of this study deserve acknowledgment: It did not examine and compare the actual teaching of graduates before and after their program experience, but rather teachers' perceptions and recollections of their teaching; opportunities for complementary research are suggested in the final section of this article.

MOTIVATIONS FOR RETURNING FOR FORMAL PREPARATION

Although a majority (57%) of teachers identified the need to be certified as their primary motivation for entering STEP (either they

wanted to move into public schools or had been teaching under an expiring emergency credential), some (35%) also believed that a formal teacher education program would provide an opportunity to cultivate prior experience and provide an important boost to their skills. Patricia,¹ who sought to transition into public school teaching, observed, "I don't want to survive; I want to teach. And I thought that an emergency credential wasn't going to give me the tools for me to succeed in the classroom as a teacher."

Some (26%) recognized the crucial gap between their subject-area knowledge and their ability to teach this to students, commonly labeled as pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987). Nancy had entered teaching with a graduate degree in geology and began to realize that

to know something and teach something were two entirely different things. And so I really needed to know how to transfer knowledge or work with the knowledge base that students had in the classroom so that they can learn more. And for me to have the skills to be able to do that is what I really came for.

Others (26%) were drawn to the idea of spending a full year devoted to learning and—especially—reflection and feedback on their practice as teachers. Citing the isolation of their classroom environments, they recalled having nothing but the most perfunctory observations of their pedagogy. As Elizabeth explained, "What I was really looking for were trained eyes on me and my teaching to give me really focused feedback. And then also the opportunity to take some time to reflect. That really seemed valuable to me." David described his need for feedback and reflection within a deeper need to sustain himself in the profession,

I started to realize that there were a lot of things I didn't know. . . . I mean, I could become a better teacher just by teaching and by talking to other people, but if I really wanted to become a better teacher, I thought I needed to go back and get some training and have some people really analyze my craft and give me some very specific feedback about what I was doing well and what I was not doing well. . . . And I just knew that it had to happen if I was going to remain a teacher. I think I felt that at the rate I was going, I wasn't going to last unless I learned some more tricks or more strategies.

Although these two teachers recognized the gaps they had in their practice, many (70%) of those interviewed admitted that it was not until participating in the extended reflection on their practice that STEP required that they realized the weaknesses in their teaching. In short, they did not know what they did not know. They may have sensed there was more to teaching than they knew, but the pressures of the job and the absence of time to reflect prevented them from identifying those concerns at the time. Others (22%) found themselves in a teaching environment that hid their shortcomings. For Maria, a teacher who had returned to her alma mater to teach, her weaknesses were cloaked by a familiar environment and smooth-running classroom. She recalled,

I think that, at the time, I didn't know what my limitations were. And I didn't know how to ask the right questions. And I think that that's something you don't know until you start a teacher program. . . . So I didn't know that that probably wasn't the best pedagogy at the time—that's what my teachers had done with me, and that's what the lesson plan said, and I was doing it, and people seemed to be paying attention, and no one was hurting anyone.

As Sue Johnston (1994) concluded in her study of the value of experience in learning to teach, "Experience alone is not enough. It is the thought and subsequent action associated with the experience which determines its value in the learning process" (p. 207). The STEP experience provided the structure and expectations for reflection on practice, combined with academic resources that offered new strategies and a deeper conceptual understanding. It became clear through these interviews that experience alone was not enough, just as it had become clear to many of these classroom veterans before and during their formal preparation.

VITAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES: FIVE THEMES

Five overlapping themes emerged as central to the learning of these experienced teachers during their program. First, teachers gained a greater awareness of the students in their classes who were struggling academically; they

also developed strategies to help these students improve achievement. Second, teachers developed a broader and more complex understanding of curriculum planning. Third, the atmosphere of collaboration among STEP peers emphasized the value of collegiality in professional life, and created a network of support and a commitment to collaboration as these teachers returned to their full-time classrooms. Fourth, the value of feedback and structured reflection mentioned earlier emerged as a vital component in the learning process. And fifth, teachers developed theoretical frameworks of education that enhanced both their classroom pedagogy and their appreciation for the broader issues of education outside their classrooms.

Recognizing and Assisting Students Who Struggle

Awareness of and facility in helping struggling students emerged as a key element of experienced teachers' development in STEP. The struggling student took many forms, including English language learners, students with learning disabilities, or just students whose learning styles and preparation levels made the curriculum particularly difficult. Looking back, all but two of these experienced teachers (91%) felt unsuccessful in this area prior to this formal preparation. David put it bluntly: "I didn't know there were different ways to reach kids, didn't know that they had different ways of learning."

Maria recounted her experience returning to teach English at her former high school, which had just detracked into heterogeneous classrooms. The school is in a college town, but surrounded by rural farmland, creating an academic hierarchy of "faculty kids" and "farm kids." Like many beginning, motivated teachers, she felt her ability to connect with students was a strength she brought to her work.

At the time, I felt like, "Oh, they're young, I'm young, we have a connection." But I don't think I was really thinking about the kids that—you know I could connect with the other children of faculty. . . . I could connect with people who'd had an experience similar to mine.

It wasn't until her STEP experience that she began to gain skills in recognizing a range of student learners and understanding the implications for pedagogical strategy.

The challenges for a beginning teacher, especially one with no formal preparation, are immense. Visions of successful teaching may be understandably limited and modest. Beginning teachers are generally more self-focused ("Am I succeeding here?") and only gradually progress to a focus on whether their students are learning (Fuller, 1969; Pogue, 1969). As Lisa recalled, "I had a particular style of teaching. And I was pretty impressed that I could do that! So, let alone think about whether kids didn't match that or not—I never really gave that much consideration." The tendency to teach as we are taught is understandable and, not surprisingly, seems strongest when no other pedagogical models have been provided. Because most STEP students—and teacher candidates in general, one could argue—were academically motivated and successful students, they were inclined to teach in ways that work with similar students. This holds clearly negative implications for struggling students. Susan recounted, "I had some classes that gelled and worked really well and responded really well to my style. But I didn't have a lot of strategies for how to deal with the classes that didn't do that on their own." Patricia concurred,

I did it how I was taught. And I don't know if that was necessarily the best way. . . . That was kind of a barrier I had with students; I thought from just explaining it to them once that they would know and they would perform.

Students who are not successful with the unidimensional approach often get categorized as unintelligent or unmotivated. For many of these teachers, they needed to recognize the diversity of learners in their classroom and expand beyond their pedagogical comfort zones. A crucial realization, Angela admitted, was that

just because it doesn't work for all your students, it doesn't mean that the students it doesn't work for aren't smart. . . . But that you just need to go from a different angle that might be uncomfortable for you.

Through the course of their program, these experienced teachers gained both an awareness of struggling students and various strategies to help them. Hannah described her increased attention:

I'm very aware of things like, you know, where the kid is sitting in the class, should I switch their seat? Will it help if I check in with them about their homework before class starts? Should I teach this in a different way so that the kids who aren't getting it from discussions get it another way? How do I give the kids more voice? It's just knowing that there are so many different ways and that one way is not going to work the same for each kid.

Four of the teachers interviewed had not recognized working with struggling students as a weak spot in their pedagogy prior to STEP, but this was not because they had experienced success, either. For example, Frances observed that her previous teaching experience did not expose her to the range of student struggles she would find elsewhere, and thus her awareness was never deeply challenged. The program preparation served a valuable purpose

partly by making me aware of all the different ways that a kid can be struggling or can have different learning styles. I didn't have a lot of experience working with language-learners until STEP, and I went to work in a district where 25% of the kids are language-learners. So, it was really helpful to have STEP there at the very beginning to guide me through—"Look, this is what the kid is going through, these are the stages of language development, and this is how you can help meet the needs."

Perhaps if Frances had remained at her former school, and if the demographics never changed, she would have remained proficient in this area. But her formal preparation experience has clearly broadened her professional knowledge base and prepared her for a wider range of students.

Developing this repertoire of skills and strategies to meet a variety of learning styles played a major role in these experienced teachers' STEP development. But 1 year of intensive study hardly suffices for such a challenging facet of teaching, and many (43%) were not content with their growth in this area. They did, however, claim a greater awareness of the issues and a general framework for addressing the needs of

struggling students in their classrooms. Susan experienced growth in this area while still acknowledging the challenge that awaits:

I think I have learned how to make kids more active in setting goals and evaluating their own learning and thinking about their own learning. That's not something I was really doing before. I have spent a lot of time thinking about ways to make my curriculum accessible to lots of different kids. I think in little ways I had started to do that before, but this year has definitely been time to really take a break and look at what ways I was doing that and not doing that. . . . I don't feel like I can say I have this neat package that I learned at Stanford that now I can put into place. But what I do think is that my work at Stanford has really motivated me to make that a priority so that I'll continue to ask myself how I can help more and more kids be successful.

It is difficult to imagine how experience alone can ensure that teachers develop sensitivity to struggling students, and particularly how it could impart strategies to help these students succeed. Trial and error might lead to improved efficacy, but as discussed later, gambling on this haphazard process endangers student learning and discourages many teachers from staying in the profession.

Designing Curricula Aligned With Learning and Assessment Goals

Although learning to meet the needs of a wide range of students emerged as the program component least likely to be gained from experience alone, 91% also mentioned various aspects of curriculum planning as equally central components of their learning. Prior to formal preparation, many (74%) of these teachers had found themselves in schools that provided little or no guidance or support for course content and pedagogy. But even the fortunate few who enjoyed strong mentorship and clear curricular expectations gained little exposure to the finer points of curriculum development, particularly in the areas of backwards planning, scaffolding, and group work.

Many (52%) of these teachers recognized a gap in their teaching and the results they were getting in terms of student learning. Even though many had developed strong rapport with students and brought with them substan-

tial subject knowledge, they lacked vital insight into curricular planning and techniques. Katy recounted that prior to her teacher education program,

I felt very inadequate so many times, not knowing what are the best ways that I can . . . help them go from this point to that point and actually advance. I realized this year that you can have the heart for it, and know a few tricks here and there, and be able to facilitate a relationship so maybe that learning is probable, but gosh, it's so much about instructional strategies, really knowing how, though.

The concept of unit planning, with long-range goals, was conspicuously absent in many (76%) teachers' repertoires. Bill explains,

Before, it was more of a sort of day-to-day type of thing, more of a day-to-day with less of a focus on the bigger picture. Now . . . I have a far better picture of what we need to do a week from then, a week from the day I teach a class. . . . To be that organized only makes you a better teacher.

The techniques of scaffolding and backwards planning, crucial for effective unit organization, needed development. "I definitely didn't have the idea about getting students' attention or teaching it in a way that would really make sense to them, and relating it to their prior knowledge," Julia admitted. Teachers often relied on their enthusiasm for the subject material to engage their students. "The reason I went into English, the reason that I wanted to be an English teacher," recalled Maria,

is that I thought it would be a great thing to read a lot of books and sit down with an age group that I really enjoy being with and talking about it and writing it. But I think that what I've learned through English C&I is that you really need a tighter purpose. You really need to know where you're going. And so I don't think I would have thought, before STEP, to really backward plan.

This lack of comprehensive vision not only prevented thoughtful unit planning but also inhibited teachers' abilities to address and assess vital skills and knowledge over the course of the year. John described the problem:

I didn't have a big vision for where my class needed to go, what was my end result, where did I want to be at the end of the semester, both in content and in skills, so I couldn't work cogently towards those goals.

This connection between instructional objectives and assessment eluded most (82%) of these experienced teachers.

Even the logistics of daily lesson planning escaped many (65%) teachers. David admitted,

I didn't really know how to plan a lesson. I didn't see the value in utilizing every minute of instruction and having a very specific plan for the period and knowing . . . to start out with warm-up and do some closure. I didn't know any of that stuff! I had no idea.

Beyond the simple logistics and effective use of classroom time, the techniques of developing learning objectives and assessments did not come naturally, either. Lisa explained,

I would sit down and I would plan things, but I never knew how long it was going to take or really thought, "OK, what is it that I want them to know? How are they going to know it? And how am I going to know that they know it?" I never did all that kind of stuff. . . . Time would go by and I'd say, "Well, I'd better do an assessment here. Or a test. Or I better have some sort of project here." You know what I mean? It's kind of just a natural feeling.

After their teacher education experience, the problems inherent in relying on "natural feelings" became apparent; too many students were not learning what was expected, and the lack of a coherent and comprehensive approach to curriculum made monitoring that learning and addressing its deficiencies tremendously difficult.

Valuing Collegiality and Benefiting From Collaboration

Few elements of the program experience elicited as much enthusiastic praise as collegiality and collaboration. This took two different forms—a deep appreciation of the contributions of STEP classmates in the learning process, as well as a recognition of the program's emphasis on collaborative professionalism, both in the university classroom and the student teaching experience.

One might expect that experienced teachers would find it frustrating to engage in formal preparation alongside total novices, but this was decidedly not the case. Although 2 of those interviewed admitted to occasional impatience with their novice colleagues when they advo-

cated perspectives that seemed naive or idealistic, all those queried saw themselves having much to learn and valued the opportunity to interact with STEP's thoughtful, capable students regardless of their experience level. Never was any sentiment expressed that the preparation for experienced teachers should be segregated from that of novices. In addition, several graduates (17%) spoke of the network of classmates that was now available to them on graduation: "By far one of the best things about this program is the colleagues we have," Maria noted. "You know, we have this network now. . . . One of them is collecting curriculum and putting it on the Web. So that's going to be an incredible resource."

Although the practical benefits of a collegial community emerged from these graduates' formal preparation experience, it was a conceptual shift that delivered an even greater impact: Through the structure of the teaching program, the organization of curriculum, and design of program assessments, students developed a strongly collaborative conception of teaching that went far beyond trading curriculum online. Most of those interviewed had entered the teaching profession in a severely isolated context; only 5 of the 27 graduates interviewed described their pre-STEP teaching experience as including strong mentorship or collegial support. The so-called lone ranger model was largely in effect; it took the intentional structure of formal preparation to shift their vision of teaching and foster skills of collaboration. As Frances explained, "Because of STEP and because of student teaching, I began to realize how much of a cooperative effort teaching is." For many (70%) of these experienced teachers, the collegial support they received during their formal teacher education and the prospects for continued support and inspiration afterwards were advantages they had not enjoyed prior to their teacher education program.

For several teachers (13%), this collaborative emphasis provided encouragement as they reflected on their struggles of pre-STEP teaching. The isolation and discouragement they had faced could be tempered and transformed in the future by a network of support. This emphasis

on developing such networks even influenced teachers' visions of the professional environment they sought after graduation. Frances recalled,

Actually, one of the things that I looked for when I was looking for a permanent teaching position was a really supportive staff, and I was lucky enough to find one, and now the reason I would not leave my school for anything is . . . because I've just found a wonderful group of teachers who really help each other out, they believe in working together, they believe in a cohesive program across the grade levels.

Perhaps the isolated experiences many of these teachers endured prior to formal preparation would have finally prompted them to seek a more collaborative environment, but it seems at least as likely that this ongoing separation would have driven them out of the profession altogether.

Growing Through Expert Feedback and Structured Opportunities for Reflection

In addition to the widespread isolation these teachers faced in their pre-STEP experiences, most (78%) remarked on the lack of opportunities for structured reflection and feedback. One teacher saw this as a personal failing and many others (61%) as an organizational flaw, but literally all recognized their formal preparation as a precious opportunity to practice this and use it to improve their pedagogy. Elizabeth recalled,

That was a weakness of mine, pulling back from something you've just done and saying, "OK, what worked? What didn't? How can I make this better for next year?" And you do that, I think, all the time when you pull out your last year's stuff and say, "OK, how can I improve this?" or "Oh, I remember that didn't work really well." But I don't think I ever got deeper, like, "OK, well why didn't it work very well? Or what are the things that I want to work on in myself as a teacher?" I hadn't had that time to think about those kinds of things.

Several teachers (13%) acknowledged the opportunities that their schools or districts provided them for professional development but found them too sporadic and haphazard to allow for sustained reflection and growth. Gwen described a course on reciprocal learning that her district offered, which consisted of

a consulting team that came through the district and just rattled off their spiel and gave us a stack of things to throw on the Xerox machine. They didn't give us any background in this. . . . I suppose over a 10-year period of time, I would have slowly pieced this together. But I would have lost the depth that I would have otherwise gained in the teacher prep program. . . . Once you get into teaching, you're pretty much in your own little box. It's a very isolated kind of business.

This theme of a painfully slow learning curve emerged from numerous (39%) teachers' comments. Three of them felt quite sure that they would not have remained in the profession if they had not received the benefits of their preparation program, both in terms of improving their efficiency and efficacy as educators. Others would likely have persevered, gaining skills and mastery through the challenges they faced. Perhaps not surprisingly, the appeal of this option had dimmed considerably in light of their growth in STEP; as Barbara asked when acknowledging that experience would have had its own lessons, "But why do you have to reinvent the wheel through 10 years of experience?"

These teachers did not dismiss the growth that could arise from experience, and some recognized that development opportunities may have existed within their schools, but many others (65%) felt that the structure of the school day and its manifold expectations that did not protect time for focused reflection and collaborative feedback that they found so valuable in their formal preparation. For many (57%), the most appreciated program feature was the opportunity to observe and reflect on the teaching of others. Angela spoke to the difference between the haphazard ruminations that regular teaching permits and more structured opportunities for reflection: "It's one thing to have thoughts flit across your mind. It's another thing to have to try and explain them to a third party." Teacher education provided that opportunity for growth.

These teachers recognized that structured expectations for reflection were vital features of the program. The expectations often included formal write-ups and developing insights for an audience other than oneself and occurred not only in the wake of teaching episodes but also

when designing curriculum and exploring theory. As Trevor recalled,

In one of the courses, we talked about different levels of understanding, the simplest being recall to the most complex being synthesizing ideas across curriculum. I feel like having thought about that explicitly and forced to sit through it and write about it and reflect on it is really valuable because, in the long run, that's the kind of thing that gives you a goal for how you're going to organize your teaching.

Elizabeth summed it up, "As silly as it sounds, a lot of it is just having somebody say, 'Try this now with this particular thing' and being asked to do that."

Most (83%) teachers pointed to the value of observation feedback provided by their cooperating teachers and university supervisors, as well as the requirement that they reflect on videotapes of their own teaching. For Elizabeth, the ultimate benefit of formal preparation was

the reflection. Just because I hadn't taken the time to do that before. And I'm a very fast teacher. Like, I work very quickly. And watching myself on the videotape and talking to my university supervisor about it when she came to watch me, it was eye opening, you know? It was like, "Oh my god! My pace!" You know? If there were a kid who was having trouble . . .

This echo of the first theme of increased awareness of struggling students underscores the interrelated nature of the benefits of formal teacher education even for experienced teachers. These twin pillars of structured reflection and feedback add to the list of learning experiences that were insufficiently provided in the so-called school of experience.

Developing Conceptual Frameworks to Refine Practice and Foster Professional Vision

The final theme that emerged in this study was the development of a theoretical framework to inform and guide practice, a benefit mentioned by 70% of those interviewed. Contrary to the critique that little practical connection exists between what is learned in schools of education and the world of the classroom, these experienced teachers identified two major benefits of developing a conceptual framework.

First, the exposure to various concepts and theories helped clarify and confirm past practice or, alternatively, challenged them to revise their pedagogy. The second benefit involved the expansion of teachers' horizons to the broader educational policy world in a way that helped define and inspire their own vision and priorities as educators.

STEP was designed to have theory and practice informing each other, to benefit from the "rub between theory and practice" (Miller & Silvernail, 1994). Many (57%) of these teachers felt that their previous experience served as an advantage when it came to encountering educational theory. As Susan put it, her classroom memories "gave me a context in which to imagine" the implications of theory. The various theories, remarked Lisa, "made sense to me because I had prior knowledge. I could put a face on it." Indeed, the opportunity to explore theory seemed especially valuable to these experienced practitioners, perhaps more so than to their novice counterparts in the program. Some of this appreciation was likely a result of this context described above, as well as perhaps a less urgent need for immediate practical application. One such need, mentioned by 35% of those interviewed, was classroom management; David posited that he had a greater receptivity to theoretical concerns

because I had some idea about how things were and I'd been in the classroom and I wasn't afraid of kids. And I felt comfortable in front of a group of kids. And I felt like I was able to focus on becoming a better teacher, as opposed to learning how to just be a teacher.

Arleen noted,

I was more ready to be reflective. Readier to be reflective than some other students were. . . . Part of it, I think, is because I'd taught before and . . . in any new learning situation, like a student teaching situation, the first piece is just mastering the mechanics.

A specific example of valued theory that arose in these interviews hearkens back to the theme of curriculum planning. Having struggled with little direction or guidance in planning units and lessons, many (65%) of these experienced teachers recognized quickly and eagerly how the literature on curriculum plan-

ning could improve their practice. Katy observed,

I think I saw so much value in things that I was learning during the year about curriculum and about the importance of backward design and those sort of things, that maybe if you hadn't gone through the sort of the embarrassing, painful experiences of curriculum design that I went through, you might not see as much importance or value in them.

As acknowledged previously, no 1- or 2-year preparation program will provide everything a teacher needs for their career, and many (57%) of these experienced teachers understood the value of developing a conceptual framework in light of this reality. They saw the framework as sustaining their professional growth long after the program experience and its specific resources have passed. As Trevor observed,

I don't really feel at this point like I have all the tools that I need to really get people learning all the stuff they need to learn, but I think STEP has given me ways to think about it.

The second major benefit of developing a conceptual framework for teaching involves a broadening of horizons. As noted earlier, many teachers valued the opportunity for sustained, formal reflection, and contrasted it to the lack of opportunity to step back during their previous teaching experience. As full-time classroom teachers, they had felt consumed by the day-to-day demands of the job, and those beginning years posed the additional challenge of learning the mechanics of teaching. Even further from their minds was the thought of the larger educational world beyond the classroom walls, the world of policy and systemic reform. As Elizabeth explained, "I think the reality is that once you immerse in the day-to-day workings of a classroom . . . the big picture is something that you just don't have time to think about." The mix of the practical and the theoretical at STEP allowed this broader perspective to take shape for teachers. Elizabeth continued,

Some of these larger questions about education and the system and its purpose, that I don't think I ever got a chance to address as a teacher, were things that I got to talk about with my university supervisor, with other STEP students in my classes.

Teachers found that this broader perspective also enhanced their day-to-day work as well. Encouraged to develop a vision for education that extended beyond their classroom walls, they recognized greater value in the work they were doing: "All of a sudden it was like, what I'm doing now has a context, it's so much more meaningful, so much more intellectually stimulating," remarked Karen. "It's not just about developing a math lesson, but there's a larger, more complex purpose."

Although a course of study that neglects the mechanics of pedagogy is clearly poor preparation for the classroom, these experienced teachers also recognized the value of theoretical constructs that could inform and inspire their practice. As noted before, perhaps these ideas could have been pieced together from random in-service opportunities, but the priority placed on them by these graduates speaks to the importance of not leaving them to chance.

THE DOWNSIDE OF "EXPERIENCE FIRST"

As many teachers speculated, their previous classroom experience—particularly in its deficiencies—may have made them more receptive to exploring theory and understanding its relevance and value for their teaching. This experiential context in which to appreciate and understand theory suggests a possible advantage of gaining classroom teaching experience prior to entering a formal program. Although this may be the case, we need to balance that consideration against the clear downside of such a path, both from the teacher's perspective and the effect on students and their learning. As Pamela Grossman (1989) pointed out in her study of teachers with no teacher education coursework, "Learning from experience requires first that one interpret that experience. Without a framework for making sense of student difficulties . . . the teachers' learning is largely idiosyncratic and potentially miseducative" (p. 202).

The double-edged sword of learning from experience alone emerged in three ways in these interviews. First, some (22%) of these experienced teachers observed that they entered STEP

with a fairly selective sense of purpose, probably more so than the novices. This allowed them to navigate more efficiently the multiple, sometimes overwhelming, demands of the program. These teachers carried a strong sense of priority—class x or assignment y appeared particularly helpful to their practice, but based on their past experiences, requirement z did not deserve a significant investment of effort. If their past experience about z had been misinformed, however, they missed out on valuable learning.

But an even greater weakness of the "experience first" model does not involve the biases that may color future learning for that teacher. Instead, it comes at great cost to student learning. Nearly half (46%) of the teachers who expressed appreciation for the context that their previous teaching experience had provided also rued the disservice they did to their students because of lack of preparation. David admitted,

I didn't know really what I was doing. My only experience basically had been watching the other two math teachers from the previous year and kind of taking things from what they were doing. So I was a very traditional teacher. I did a lot of lecture and assigned problems. . . . And I look back and I think, "Gosh, if I only knew then what I know now!"

Because these largely untrained teachers were trying to learn everything as they went along, basic matters of subject content and classroom management drew the bulk of their attention. Echoing the first theme of awareness of struggling students, Susan conceded,

My first couple years of teaching, I think I was so focused on curriculum that I didn't probably see the kids as individuals as much. And I wasn't a very good safety net for my kids that weren't succeeding. . . . I let a lot of kids slide through the cracks.

Angela added to the discouraging assessment:

I really feel like those 2 years in teaching . . . I was forced to sink or swim. And, of course, after going through STEP, I'm like, oh, I need to go back and apologize to every single one of those kids.

Such admissions, particularly coming from such teachers with strong intellectual backgrounds and an obvious love for teaching, should give us serious pause before we continue to advocate that prospective teachers should try

it out for a year or two before investing in formal preparation.

A final weakness of the “experience first” model is the heightened probability that if a teacher does not receive the preparation necessary for success in the classroom, discouragement will ensue. Some (39%) of those interviewed began to feel that lack of efficacy; they were obviously ones who decided to pursue the formal preparation they needed. But as statistics on alternative-credential teacher retention rates suggest, far more leave the profession instead (Darling-Hammond, Hudson, & Kirby, 1989; Lutz & Hutton, 1989; Wright, McKibbin, & Walton, 1987). When asked about the value of learning from experience alone, Hannah was skeptical: “If you set them up to just meander their way through teaching . . . it’s not that fun, I’ve done it. You know, it doesn’t make you want to be a teacher.”

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The growing swell of teacher retirements and a nearly one third teacher attrition rate after 5 years foster increasing pressure, particularly on disadvantaged districts with the fewest resources and supports for new teachers, to hire unlicensed teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Hussar, 1999). Many of the teachers interviewed for this study began their careers with provisional credentials and then found themselves, due to state requirements, needing to obtain regular licensure to continue teaching. Although the voices of these teachers illustrate the problems of relying on firsthand experience absent the support of formal preparation, current licensing and hiring realities make it incumbent on teacher education programs to identify the particular needs of this likely growing subset of teachers to students. In addition, teacher educators can benefit from this group’s keen sense of where current programs diverge from the world of practice.

Based on the perceptions and recollections of these experienced teachers, this study suggests the following five areas of distinct value for experienced teachers as they return for formal preparation: (a) recognizing and assisting struggling students; (b) designing curricula aligned

with learning and assessment goals; (c) valuing collegiality and benefiting from collaboration; (d) growing through expert feedback and structured opportunities for reflection; and (e) developing conceptual frameworks to refine practice and foster professional vision. Additional research will help clarify their needs even further; one potential avenue for future inquiry would be to identify program admitees and observe their teaching prior to their program entry, as well as their teaching after completion. Less ambitiously, a research study might interview teachers prior to their formal education process, providing a more immediate sense of their prelicensure teaching uninfluenced by their program experience.

“To say that one learns from experience—one of the most basic beliefs of teachers—does not mean that more experience by itself results in improved teaching,” Alan Tom (1999) pointedly observed. “If this were the case, the teacher with the most years of teaching would inevitably be the best instructor” (p. 247). The results of this study support the contention that formal teacher education fosters vital learning that classroom experience alone is unlikely to provide. Gwen’s teaching story underscored this point; she described the school where she worked prior to STEP as the ideal nurturing environment, with a range of professional development opportunities and avenues for growth. Yet she felt as though there were still gaps to fill in her understanding of pedagogy and her own practice. She reflects,

I had the most incredible mentor teachers ever. And yet they were 55 years old and had gone to state and done a teacher training program in half a year and didn’t necessarily think about the philosophy of why they were doing that.

The wisdom of practice offered by her mentors was substantial and obviously valued, but the complexities of teaching deserved a depth of preparation, a dialectic between theory and practice that her school alone could not provide.

It is this complexity, this multilayeredness, that Lisa spoke to when she described the facets of teaching that experience alone did not address, the changes in her practice gained from her formal preparation:

Before, it was pure content. That was the only thing. I was like, "What am I going to teach this week as far as content? And what kind of fun thing can we do with this and how can I make it interesting?" That was it. So coming out of the STEP program, it was the whole structure. . . . These are my student objectives: How am I going to get them there? How am I going to know they got there? What are they going to show me? What are my final outcomes? And what am I going to do if they don't get there? And what are my checks along the way? . . . Classroom management was another total layer. Then learning styles and being sensitive to the cultures and LEP [Limited English Proficient] kids . . . So it was just all of these layers and all these dimensions. And then how to get a safe environment and how to respect everybody. . . . Just so many more layers.

A profession with so many layers deserves a comprehensive and thoughtfully structured program of preparation, one that recognizes the value of classroom experience but situates it in an intellectually rigorous context of reflection, feedback, and collaboration. The aspects of their preparation that these experienced teachers point to as missing from their previous world of classroom experience alone provide a strong indication of its value in a profession that expects so much of its practitioners. John concluded his interview with a powerful assessment of his chosen profession:

You can be a mediocre to poor teacher very easily. And in that case, I think it's a simple job. But to be a good teacher and one that expands and keeps learning, it's the hardest job I've ever done, and I've done a lot of jobs. And the pedagogy that goes with a lot of these areas is really complex, and I had no idea how complex it was and how much of a profession that it was.

NOTE

1. All student names are pseudonyms.

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