Where’s the Red Queen?
Ending Three-Card Monte in Teacher Education

By Mark Alter & Gordon M. Pradi

Claims abound among teacher educators in schools of education that their programs are effective at preparing new teachers. Yet who stands prepared to validate the merits of these programs? Where is that elusive red queen in the cards of their process, practice, and procedures? Unfortunately, both existing and newly emerging approaches to teacher education are often ideologically rather than empirically driven. The fact that more than one teaching style can work successfully across discernibly different student, school, and community settings patently suggests more than one route can lead to effective classroom performance. Still, are schools of education producing the kind of valid and reliable evidence of good teacher training that will allow students of education to follow the route appropriate for them?

Unfortunately, lacking a coherent and broadly shared assessment strategy, teacher education programs readily devolve into unverifiable episodic events. Programs become more influenced by financial needs than the wants of new funders, and who happens to be making the trendiest reform cools off the month. How do we demonstrate to an increasingly skeptical public that teacher education programs in schools of education are not merely organized for the school’s own convenience and benefit? How do we make sure we are serving our students, who in the end will be responsible for raising academic achievement across the country?

These concerns about the quality of professional knowledge and expertise in the schools of education inevitably resurfaced with the recent approval by the New York Board of Regents of a new alternative stand-alone graduate school of education: the Relay School of Education. With the Relay startup in the fall of 2011, the Regents will establish a new precedent for certifying any number of non-university-affiliated teacher-training initiatives in the future.

The novelty of Relay’s independent entrepreneurial status lies in its no longer having to rely on the existing university model to provide its teachers with coursework content required for certification. Rather, Relay will itself design and deliver all necessary pedagogical knowledge. Predictably, established schools of education are up in arms. Not only is there the issue of who gets to establish what constitutes a graduate degree (did alone what content knowledge candidates need), but also the threat that, given a more affordable option, the new kids on the block will poach much of the existing graduate school clientele. Instead of a defensive reaction to Relay, what if we saw this new certification program as signaling an opportune moment for the launch of a collaborative venture—one that could bring genuine accountability to the field of teacher preparation?

It is hardly news that alternative-certification initiatives such as Relay represent an attempt to address the ongoing crisis in recruiting and educating future teachers. But the current crisis in educating educators is not simply about quantity; it also showcases a bitchter debate about teacher quality. Those who enter the teaching profession are often viewed as ill prepared for the challenges associated with an ever more rigorous accountability system, and for working with culturally and linguistically diverse students, including many with disabilities.

Such realities spotlight schools of education, which today face pressures from all directions to improve. New studies question their low admissions standards and their continuing ideological bias toward prescriptive education. Indeed, critics now challenge their very existence, and competition from fast-track alternative-certification routes threatens their long-held monopoly on training teachers. Yet despite the competition among diverse approaches to educating teachers—the traditional university model, alternative certifications, online programs, and the wariness of coursework on the basis of examinations or life experience—where is the agreed-upon benchmark for judging the efficacy of any route into the classroom? In short, claims and self-serving rhetoric aside, the field of teacher education has largely failed to identify the critical factors needed to prepare a teacher to teach on the first day of school.

Remarkably, the list of complications any teacher might be called upon to exercise can never quite be fully articulated, despite our knowing more today than we did a decade ago about how to measure effective teachers. There’s no question that teachers need to master “essential” content, skills, and instructional strategies required for effective learning; yet such mastery never automatically guarantees the academic achievement of their students.

In addition, teachers’ attitudes and beliefs about their personal effectiveness or efficacy appear to distinguish between more and less effective teachers. Among other important competencies are people skills and a firm commitment to the community it is embedded within the values of our democratic system. Given the number of unanswered questions about how to prepare a highly effective teacher, the fact that new approaches for educating and sustaining beginning teachers have proliferated is hardly surprising. Indeed, if we knew the best ways to educate a teacher, there would be greater agreement on standards for teacher education programs, and probably fewer alternative routes for becoming a teacher.

How might we proceed in this critical area of teacher-preparation assessment? While any particular teacher-education program has graduates who are effective with their own students, what evidence exists that current teacher education procedures are responsible for such results? That is the question seeking an answer.

We believe teacher instruction must explicitly connect with student achievement, both at the school and teacher-preparation-program levels. All paths to teacher preparation should be required to conduct empirical research on the aspects of their programs that lead to teacher effectiveness. Such a research effort might highlight any number of interventions, but six areas of inquiry form a starting point.

1. Program content. How does content coverage and mastery, at each grade level, for each subject, and with

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diverse students (gifted, English-language-learner, and special-needs) relate to teacher success?

• Delivery process. How do "methods courses" proceed in relation to the tension between real, school environments and university locations?

• Instructional accountability. For any given preparatory experience, what constitutes a developmental program and is a program's "curriculum" subject to continuous and rigorous evaluation?

• Student-teaching. How much student-teaching is needed to prepare a prospective teacher?

• Management of inter- and intra-program relationships. How do university faculty members and school-based faculty from different disciplines and different philosophical persuasions achieve consensus when deliberating on matters that affect students and curriculum?

• Instrument accountability. How does a certification program demonstrate it is structured effectively and efficiently to prepare successful teachers?

No单一 study of teacher training can be totally persuasive. Still, unless teacher-educators build such a program of inquiry, we will have no way of adequately defending our practices, of determining how to improve existing programs, or of making sound judgments regarding proposed alternatives.

By the question remains: What features of any teacher-preparation program—undergraduate, graduate, or stand-alone—succeed in creating future teachers who can demonstrate student learning and contribute to a school culture where teaching professionals continually assess and renew instruction and curriculum in their collective classrooms?

Weingarten questions this pot schools of education at risk. Are we willing to allow teacher-preparation candidates to be screened by those claiming the elusive red queen lies right before their eyes? On the other hand, with shared evidence as the guiding rule, we can welcome any number of critical friends, including Beley, to join the challenges of creating the best teachers for tomorrow.

Why Wrong Is Not Always Bad

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what we're telling them about mistakes and failure.

One way we can do this is by understanding the example of "blind subjects," and "guise as mind sets." Those with fixed mind sets, as Professor Dweck says, believe either we're good at something—whether it's math or music or baseball—or we're not. When we have a fixed mindset, mistakes serve no purpose but to highlight failures.

Those with what Professor Dweck calls growth mind sets, believe that some people are better or worse in certain areas, but we can improve and develop our skills and abilities, are much more likely to be able to accept mistakes because they know that they part of learning. And it's been shown that when students are taught about growth mindsets, their motivation to learn increases.

I do know to this message about the need for students to learn to blunder and fail resonates with many. When they hear me speak about the role of mistakes, they nod and tell me stories. Such as the 4th grade teacher who said she has high-performing students who fall apart when taking standardized tests because they don't know what to do when they don't know all the answers. Or the high school art teacher who talked about students who broke down when he criticized their work.

"As an employee, I would rather hire a good B or C student than an A student," one teacher told me. "They're able to take risks and be challenged."

Of course, much of this comes to shift the way we look at and react to mistakes falls on parents. We have to be willing to let our children struggle and fall and make mistakes without always rushing to protect them or fix the problem.

We also have to be careful not to give the contradictory message that mistakes are OK, except when they count.

Let me end with an anecdote about my 15-year-old son. He recently received a B-plus on a difficult research paper that he had worked fairly hard on. His first instinct was disappointment—it wasn't an A. I asked to see the teacher's comments. As I read them, I realized that they were thorough and insightful; in fact, it was a good paper. I then went over the comments with him. The process was working exactly as it should. He was learning. And so was I.