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How Shall We Prepare Teachers for Deeper Community Partnerships?

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How Shall We Prepare Teachers for Deeper Community Partnerships?

Abstract

Increasingly, high schools partner with local communities to provide students with meaningful work-based learning experiences, yet teacher preparation programs do not teach candidates how to facilitate, maintain, and make best use of these partnerships. This article investigates how to prepare candidates to work in these new school formats.

Keywords

education reform, teacher preparation, partnerships

HOW SHALL WE PREPARE TEACHERS FOR DEEPER COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS?

What Does “Deeper Partnerships” Mean?

On July 31, 2018, President Trump signed his first major education policy bill, the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Education Week, July 31, 2018). This reauthorization of the Perkins Act allows states greater latitude in use of federal Career Technical Education funds, which could be a boon to a school reform movement sweeping the country. Under the auspices of the National Academies Foundation, the Linked Learning Alliance, Ford NGL, and the Southern Regional Education Board’s High Schools That Work, and other networks, thousands of schools are experimenting with innovative combinations of meaningful Career Technical Education and rigorous college preparatory academics to fulfill the promise of college and career readiness for hundreds of thousands of students.

Regardless of their network affiliation, these schools exhibit common characteristics. They are organized around one or more career themes and collaborate with community partners to provide meaningful Work-Based Learning experiences. Teachers approach their subjects through a career-themed lens, often co-planning with teachers from other subject areas so that the career theme is woven throughout all classes. Instruction and assessment employ Project-Based Learning formats and local industry partners help to ensure authenticity.

One national network describes the reform as:

An approach to education that transforms the traditional high school experience by bringing together strong academics, a demanding technical education, and real-world experience to help students gain an advantage in high school, postsecondary education, and careers (ConnectEd, 2014).

The proven benefits this approach provides students, teachers, and their communities have sparked the spread of this reform movement (Linked Learning Alliance, 2018).

What Knowledges/Skills do Educators Need to Engage in Deeper Community Partnerships?

The reform fundamentally restructures school schedules, their internal and external relationships, instructional practices and assessments, and learning expectations. Many schools use the *Behaviors of Learning and Teaching Continuum* developed by ConnectEd: The California Center for College and Career to maintain fidelity to the reform model. This measure describes overt student behaviors in several categories; Collaboration, Student-direction, Outcome-focus, Relevance, Rigor, and Curriculum Integration. Stakeholders use the measure to assess “the progress of students, teachers, and industry and community partners in developing ... behaviors of learning and teaching (BLT) that dramatically improve student motivation, empowerment, understanding and achievement” (ConnectEd, 2014, p.1). In each category, the observable behaviors go far beyond traditional school practices and what is normally taught in Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs).

What Challenges do Deeper Community Partnerships Pose for Educator Preparation?

Despite the rapid spread of the career-themed school format, EPPs have been slow to adjust their content, structures, and practices to meet the needs of school partners implementing this reform. For instance, how do the collaborative learning strategies we teach novice teachers prepare them to help students work “with industry and postsecondary partners as learning resources and project clients” (ConnectEd, 2014, p.2)? Which of our methods courses prepares teacher to help students make “connections across core academic and career technical subjects in

theme-based interdisciplinary projects” (ConnectEd, 2014, p.2)? By and large, the focus of teacher preparation has been limited to work in one classroom or school building.

Career-themed pathways need teachers who can reach out and collaborate with community members and industry professionals and to maintain those collaborations, but EPPs do not regularly prepare teachers to do this. EPPs may promote student self-direction to teacher candidates, yet novice teachers come to our seminars exhausted after their days in clinical practice, because teachers do so much for students that students should do for themselves. Former National Council of Teachers of Education President Carol Jago began professional development seminars by reminding participants that veteran teachers often do the same (Jago, 2013). Career-themed pathways focus on student outcomes, but evaluations of teaching still largely focus on teacher behavior, not student outcomes (Education Professional Standards Board, 2018). Kentucky’s academic standards call for secondary education that provides “a range of relevant, meaningful and rigorous academic opportunities anchored in real-life contexts for learning,” but teachers and teacher candidates still struggle with the concept of rigor in their classrooms (Kentucky Department of Education, 2015, p. 277). Career-themed pathways highly value integrated approaches to curriculum, but EPPs continue to silo novice teachers in subject-alike cohorts. This “siloing” encourages them to teach discrete content areas in isolation from one another.

How Do We Effectively Prepare Educators for Deeper Community Partnerships?

In order to prepare novice teachers for the higher order of collaboration required by career-themed school formats, EPPs should model intentional connections among schools, the university, and the community. Perhaps novice teachers could serve internships in local businesses or community agencies to better understand real-life applications of their content

areas. Perhaps methods instructors could make intentional connections to such real-life applications and invite local industry professionals to co-assess authentic content and assessments in students' lesson plans.

High school students report that strong connections between what they learn in school and applications to life outside of school lead to greater motivation and self-direction (Warner et al., 2016). These students are more outcome-focused, leading to higher levels of academic achievement and greater efficiency moving through school (Warner, et al., 2016). Perhaps greater emphasis by EPPs on the "why" of teaching particular content, rather than just the "how" will encourage novice teachers to attend more to student outcomes than teacher inputs.

Career-themed pathways achieve rigor by asking students to apply content knowledge from all areas to real-life problems through authentic projects. EPPs should include significant instruction in Project-Based Learning and authentic assessment for teacher candidates. The career-themed approach necessitates co-planning and co-assessment across content areas and with community partners. EPPs should provide similar experiences for students. Perhaps discrete subject area methods courses could assign a common interdisciplinary unit and authentic assessment as a culminating course activity, and restructure class meeting time to allow students to meet with community partners and to co-plan across content disciplines.

Conclusion

Clearly these changes require re-envisioning educator preparation to serve 21st century educational aims. Re-envisioning educator preparation starts with re-thinking the nature of knowledge, its purposes, and those of the institutions we design to create it. Information does not come to us from the real world in discrete disciplinary packets with ready-made labels such

as Mathematics, Language Arts, Science, or Social Studies, nor do the real-world problems we use that information and our knowledge to solve. Western culture imposed those categorical structures on reality through the historical development of higher education, but the greatest thinkers in that tradition did their best work by transcending restrictive disciplinary categories. Leonardo Da Vinci tapped his deep understandings of anatomy, literature, physics, chemistry, and aesthetics to produce his art and inventions. Einstein combined his knowledge of physics, astronomy, and other fields with his skills of visualization to devise his landmark theories, then described them using mathematics. If we intend to build on their achievements, we should prepare teachers to encourage students to do the same, to think outside the boxes.

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