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# Introduction: High Needs Schools - Preparing Teachers for Today's World

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# INTRODUCTION

**jonathan g. silin**

In the second decade of the 21st century, some schools are in trouble and some schools are not. The subject of this Occasional Paper is the preparation of teachers for schools that—lacking sufficient resources, effective leadership, or vocal advocates—are failing to educate their students by any reasonable measures.<sup>1</sup> Often located in economically and socially stressed urban communities, these schools are overflowing with students from historically underserved groups and families of newly arrived immigrants. We want to prompt thoughtful conversations about the needs of these students and their teachers without naming problems and imposing solutions in ways that the primary actors in this challenging drama might not recognize or accept. This attention to the self-perception of the communities we serve is essential to the ethics of care in a democratic society.

In recent years when legislators and presidents have turned their attention to troubled schools, they have increasingly supported quick, dramatic fixes to persistent and complicated issues. Readers of this volume will be familiar with such panaceas: close the school; dismiss the principal and/or half the staff; place the district under court supervision; create alternative, publicly funded schools outside the “system.” The federal response has offered a limited menu of one-size-fits-all solutions to a myriad of issues that take different forms in every context.

The teachers and teacher educator contributors to *High-Needs Schools: Preparing Teachers for Today’s World* offer a more variegated set of responses grounded in a diversity of local experiences. Their approaches to researching and understanding the immediacy of becoming a teacher are based on decades of working in hard-pressed urban schools and the institutions that supply them with new educators. The multiple authorship of all but one of the essays published here attests the complexity of the task at hand and the need for collaboration at every level of the educational endeavor.

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1 Prior Occasional Papers have addressed a progressive approach to the education of all teachers (Nager & Shapiro, 2007, OP #18), alternative routes to teacher certification to speed effective teachers into high-needs schools (Silin, 2008, OP #20), and the creation of more inviting career paths to retain excellent teachers (Cochran-Smith, 2006, OP #16).

Most of these essays focus simultaneously on the noisy, busy, sometimes chaotic classrooms where children spend their days and on the often more restrained, if not constrained, classrooms where adults learn to become teachers at night. Compelling classroom practices and engaging teacher preparation go hand in hand in these essays. As a group the authors ask: what kinds of experiences will help novice educators become wise and mindful guides, capable of creating settings conducive to students' learning and growth?

Three major themes thread their way through this volume—the need for new teachers to create culturally responsive curriculum, to become engaged members of the larger school community, and to participate in effective school-university partnerships.

While culturally responsive pedagogy makes sense in all schools, it is essential to the success of under-resourced schools where students may come from diverse backgrounds that often are not represented in traditional curricular materials. As Coviello and Stires so ably demonstrate, teacher research builds local, immediately useful knowledge about students and their families. It also holds potential for career long learning. Mascarenhas, Parsons, and Burrowbridge also emphasize the central role that learning about the larger community beyond the classroom plays in encouraging thoughtfully adaptive teaching responsive to the lived realities of students. In short, whether through action research projects or community-based internships, new teachers need to know how to learn about the worlds they will inhabit.

As Goodman suggests, culturally responsive teaching refers to contemporary modes of communication as well as to what students learn about community life. He describes the way that student-made documentary film projects can enable adolescents to find their own voices and become politically engaged. While the tools are changing, the uses to which they are put—examining the social world with a critical eye to the uses and misuses of power—harken back to our progressive roots in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Teachers must be prepared to use the new technologies by experiencing them first hand and to understand the social purposes which they can serve.

Culturally responsive teachers invest in becoming politically-savvy community members. Barrett, Ford and James, for example, emphasize that experienced and neophyte teachers alike need to appreciate the complex systems in which they work. From their perspective, the changes required in high-needs schools will only come about through collaboration with all the stakeholders in a community, not

through the efforts of lone heroes working in isolated classrooms behind closed doors. Drawing on her own teaching experiences, Pam Jones makes a similar point in her interview with Linda Levine. It's critical to know when to stay in a high-needs school and when to pull up stakes and move on. It's also critical for young teachers to hear the compelling stories of those who have learned to survive and thrive while working to turn around troubled schools.

Diamond, Reitzes, and Grob suggest that the politics of surviving and thriving in high-needs schools requires high expectations, an ethic of caring, authority and presence and an abiding awareness of difference. They would add that only when new teachers are encouraged to develop a *teaching self* can they successfully navigate the inevitable tensions between openness and intentionality, empathy and authority, with a firm sense of values and objectives.

Finally, several of the essays, including Mascarenhas et al. and Stires and Coviello emphasize that only strong school-university partnerships can provide the structure for effective student teaching experiences. Most striking, Barrett, Ford and James offer a disarmingly honest portrait of one collaboration project gone astray. Over the course of a difficult first year, the “researchers” describe how they learned to focus on relationship-building rather than curricular change, on creating spaces for healthy dialogue among all community members rather than between teachers and university professors, and to recognize the very different perspectives that everyone brings to the task of school improvement. They are helping to build a context in which student teachers can learn the importance of a collaborative school culture to fostering student learning.

Our authors are not naive. They know what schools can and cannot do to promote a more just society. They also recognize the tension between offering constructive criticism and blaming those who are caught in the grips of an intractable system. Most importantly, they know that they are speaking about teachers who will work in an educational world awash in standards, high-stakes tests, and other out-comes-based performance measures of student achievement.<sup>2</sup> They recognize many ways in which the proliferation of mandates, highly scripted instructional guides, and the narrowing of the curriculum all continue to deskill

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2 The impact of this trend has been described in several *Occasional Papers* including our second issue, Vito Perrone's, *What Should We Make of Standards?* (Perrone, 1999, OP #2) and our more recent *Classroom Life in the Age of Accountability* (Boldt, Salvio & Taubman, 2009, OP #22).

and de-professionalize teaching. Performance-based pay, the end of tenure, and the targeted use of federal dollars by the Obama administration all function to keep teachers teaching to the test. Even with diminishing resources, these same teachers are called to “differentiate” instruction in classrooms filled with an ever more demanding range of students.

Despite the difficult education climate new teachers face, our contributors argue that they can still attend to who their students are, build on what they already know, and form strategic community collaborations. These educators know that teaching is far more than testing, schooling far more than just surviving, and education not limited to learning how to make a living. New teachers in high-needs schools flourish when they understand the fundamental role of education in sustaining a vibrant democracy and uphold the highest standards for what all students can achieve when challenged by a meaningful, multidimensional curriculum.