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Teacher Certification Reconsidered: Stumbling for Quality

Kate Walsh

Policymakers and the public assume that trained and certified teachers are better teachers. Aspiring teachers spend years taking education courses. Billions are spent on training programs. Public schools in all states are required to hire certified teachers.

But is there evidence that trained and certified (some states use the term “licensed”) teachers actually do a superior job of getting students to learn? The answer is the subject of an important controversy.

Kate Walsh of the Abell Foundation recently examined all of the studies that training and licensure proponents use to bolster their case, but she found no convincing evidence. Of the roughly 150 studies examined, the great majority were flawed, inconclusive, or misleading.

For example, many of them purported to measure teacher effectiveness, but “effectiveness” was defined as something other than improved student achievement. Other studies were based on small and unrepresentative samples. Still others were unpublished dissertations and contained the kind of errors often found in student research.

Walsh also found ambiguous data and questionable interpretations. For example, a study concluding that trained and certified teachers are more effective was based on the observation that schools with higher test scores have a higher percentage of fully certified teachers. This data could mean that certified teachers produce higher achievement, but it could also mean merely that suburban schools with advantaged students are more attractive to teachers and thus are able to hire certified teachers exclusively.

Walsh is not the only investigator to discover glaring weaknesses in the teacher quality research. Economists Dale Ballou and Michael Podgursky reported similar findings in a September 2000 *Teachers College Record* article. Both of these reports are buttressed by a recent study published by the University of Washington’s Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. It states: “There is no research that directly assesses what teachers learn in their pedagogical preparation and then evaluates the relationship of that pedagogical knowledge to student learning or teacher behavior.”

The Broader Controversy

Walsh's report focused primarily on Maryland, but it stirred a national controversy. Linda Darling-Hammond, Stanford Professor and recently retired Executive Director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (www.nctaf.org), is the education community's chief spokesperson on teacher training and licensure. She called Walsh's report "a stunning exercise in misrepresentation."

How could Darling-Hammond look at the same evidence and draw the opposite conclusion?

Here is some background. An enormous academic and regulatory infrastructure has grown up around the belief that training and certification make an important difference in teacher quality. NCTAF and virtually every major organization in the education community have been calling on states to increase teacher training and licensure requirements and to create independent teacher licensure boards. All of these stakeholders rely on the research challenged by Walsh.

Professor Darling-Hammond is not only the leading advocate of increased teacher certification standards, she is single most prolific author in the field of certification research. In other words, her advocacy of new standards and greater independence for licensure boards rests substantially on her own research. Clearly Professor Darling-Hammond is an authority in the field; but just as clearly, her blunt dismissal of the Walsh report is more than a scholarly disagreement.

The conflict of interest evident in this controversy highlights a larger issue with respect to teacher certification: Should states give education's internal stakeholders greater control of teacher certification even if outside observers are not able to confirm that it will benefit the public?

The history of their stewardship is not reassuring.

For decades, the interest groups represented by Dr. Darling-Hammond have been teaching's de facto gatekeepers. In collaboration with state governments, they have shaped and reshaped training and licensure to conform to education's ever-changing trends and theories. However, despite these many and varied trials, scholars from outside of education can find no convincing evidence linking standards with improved student achievement.

To the contrary, teaching has been characterized by untested innovations and ill-considered reforms. In other words, fully trained and licensed teachers repeatedly have been taught or permitted to adopt practices that later proved to be unsound or ineffective. Unlike medicine, engineering, and other professions, training and licensure in teaching has not protected the public from malpractice.

If educators are granted more complete control of training and certification standards, should everyone feel more secure about teacher quality? No--not until independent researchers can verify that certification represents competence in proven practices, not just exposure to education's latest fads.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com