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Teaching Skills Under Scrutiny

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Teaching Skills Under Scrutiny

W. James Popham

It has been an unquestioned article of faith among education professors that teachers who complete a lengthy menu of pedagogical courses are more effective in the classroom.

A 2001 report by Kate Walsh of the Baltimore-based Abell Foundation, however, strongly challenged that belief. It found that the 200 or so studies on which teacher-education's claims are based to be of "astonishingly poor quality."

Walsh's report added to doubts about the worth of teacher certification that had earlier been raised by Ballou and Podgursky. Attempts to defuse these criticisms by teacher-education authorities such as Stanford's Linda Darling-Hammond were unconvincing.

The present article adds weight to the skeptical view.

Written by a respected UCLA researcher—W. James Popham—and published in one of education's most widely circulated journals, it discusses a series of experiments that were conducted by the author in the nineteen sixties and originally reported in the *American Educational Research Journal*. The findings should have prompted careful study of the teacher-education programs. Instead, they were largely ignored.

Popham found that trained and credentialed teachers were no more effective than "people off the street" in helping students reach well-defined learning objectives.

The UCLA studies were not intended as a comparison of trained and untrained teachers. Rather, Popham measured the performance of trained and untrained teachers as part of an effort to validate a test of teaching skills. When no significant difference was found between the two groups, the test could not be validated.

In order to identify teachers who differed in effectiveness, the UCLA team spent 4 years developing three courses to be taught by trained and untrained teachers: (1) social science research methods; (2) electronics (specifically, creation of basic power supplies); and (3) auto mechanics (carburetion). Each course was accompanied by a set of resource materials.

The trained teachers were recruited from the Southern California area. They included thirteen high school social science teachers, 16 high school and junior college electronics teachers, and 28 high school and junior college auto mechanics teachers. The untrained participants included students with majors or minors in social studies, garage mechanics, television repairmen, and electronics industry workers.

All were permitted to use whatever teaching method they favored. It was presumed that the trained and experienced teachers would be vastly more effective.

Popham's concerns about teacher training's effectiveness anticipate those voiced today by policymakers and the consuming public:

But while it may be true that experienced teachers in general--and there are obviously notable exceptions--are not particularly proficient in promoting learner attainment of specified instructional objectives, this is a totally unacceptable state of affairs (bold added).

Every profession worthy of the name derives its professionalism precisely from the fact that its members possess a special expertise not present in non-members of the profession. Lawyers can prepare legal briefs. Surgeons can perform operations. Accountants can balance financial reports. People off the street can't do these things.

But do teachers bring anything to bear on an instructional situation other than a general education, native intelligence, reasonable dedication, and borrowed teaching tricks? These attributes will permit a teacher to get through the school day, and a number of pupils will undoubtedly learn something. But contrast our current educational situation with the enormous dividends we might be getting if members of the teaching profession possessed really unique capabilities to promote desirable behavior changes in learners.

Of particular relevance to today's school improvement efforts is Popham's assessment of why teacher training made no difference:

We should not be surprised that teachers are not skilled goal achievers. Certainly, they have not been trained to be; teacher education institutions rarely foster this competence (bold added). Nor is any premium placed on such instructional skill after the teacher concludes pre-service training.

The general public, most school systems, and professional teachers groups rarely attach special importance to the teacher's attainment of clearly stated instructional objectives.

Plainly, Popham's belief that the public is unconcerned about teachers producing measurable results is untrue today even if it were the case in the sixties. Taxpayers have spent billions to set standards and hold educators accountable.

However, his observation that teachers are not trained to teach prescribed objectives because schools of education consider such skills unimportant remains dead-on and poses a major barrier to school improvement.

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