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Education Matters

Promoting New Standards of Professionalism & Educational Enrichment

Will Teacher Training Reform Led by the Schools of Education Improve Student Achievement?

By J. E. Stone

Everyone from the President to Congress is calling for better-trained teachers. Failure on a state-administered literacy exam by 59 percent of Massachusetts teacher education graduates was a key factor in drawing attention to the problem. The 1998 Higher Education Act sent a particularly clear message to the schools of education and the state teacher licensing agencies: Continued funding will depend on higher standards for teachers.

Even the schools of education seem to agree. An organization representing education interests—the National Commission on Teaching & America's Future (NCTAF)—has been making the rounds of state capitals telling governors and legislators that it's time to "get serious about standards." By standards, however, they mean teacher training standards set by one of the organizations that the NCTAF represents—the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

What policymakers and the public may not understand, however, is that the NCTAF and teacher education's critics have very different conceptions of the problem. The NCTAF believes there are too many untrained teachers, while most critics believe there are too many badly trained ones.

Will more teachers receive the training necessary to bring about higher student achievement if the NCTAF has its way? Not if history is any guide. Instead, there will be more teachers trained to suit NCATE's ideas about education.

A 1997 Public Agenda poll found a "staggering disconnect" between the views of teacher education professors and those of the public. It showed that professors want less structured schooling, i.e., schooling that "facilitates inquiry" and stresses "learning how to learn." Broadly, Public Agenda found that professors are focused on the educational process and they favor "learner-centered" teaching. By contrast, polls of parents have found that they want orderly schools, ones that emphasize academic fundamentals.

The gulf between the public and the institutions that train and license teachers is little studied and little appreciated, but it is a difference that explains much about why school reform has failed. If, as recommended by the NCTAF, all teacher training is brought under the auspices of NCATE, virtually all teachers will be trained by programs that emphasize the teacher education community's aims, not the public's.

NCATE is already the largest accreditor of teacher training programs. Its current standards have been adopted in some form by forty-three states. A publication titled *Capturing the Vision: Reflections on NCATE's Redesign Five Years After* "share[s] information and perspectives between the corporate NCATE system (representatives who serve on Board of Examiners, Unit Accreditation Board, and other NCATE roles)

and faculty in the institutions that seek accreditation....” It says nothing about teaching as a means of producing student achievement.

Instead, *Capturing the Vision* asserts that teacher training programs must “first and foremost” be “dedicated” to “equity,” “diversity,” and “social justice”—egalitarian ideals widely approved within the teacher education community. It holds that teachers and administrators are morally obliged to promote social justice, i.e., obliged in the same sense that physicians are obliged to promote health and lawyers obliged to seek justice. In other words, NCATE’s current standards are founded on the notion that social and attitudinal outcomes, not academic achievement, should be teaching’s overarching objectives. Furthermore, *Capturing the Vision* makes it clear that attitudes are critical in determining whether an institution will be accredited.

The social idealism expressed in *Capturing the Vision* is conspicuously represented in the current standards with which teacher-training programs are required to comply. They include a “global” and “multicultural” curriculum and they set numerical race and gender requirements for students and professors. Again, achievement is ignored. There is no requirement for teachers to be trained in ways that are known to be effective. Indeed, there is no mention of the issue.

Spurred by growing dissatisfaction with the quality of teacher training, NCATE recently proposed a change from curriculum-based accreditation standards to those based on the competencies displayed by aspiring teachers. The new standards express concern for improved teacher knowledge and they say that student learning is teaching’s most important goal. However, the educational priorities they promote are the same, i.e., social idealism first, student achievement second. The only real difference is that the new standards assess whether aspiring teachers have mastered pedagogical orthodoxy, whereas the old standards assessed whether the training program’s curriculum was properly infused with orthodoxy.

What Parents and Policymakers Want

Few parents and policymakers are opposed to public education’s desire to improve society; they just want the improvement to take place the old-fashioned way: through the intellectual enhancement of students. Unlike NCATE, they want academic matters, not attitudinal ones, to be teaching’s top priority. They believe that schooling should, first and foremost, equip students with basics such as a broad fund of knowledge, high aspirations for achievement, and a sense of personal responsibility for success. To parents, schooling is about their hopes for their children, not social engineering.

Teacher concern for equity, diversity, and social justice need not undermine academic aims and yet it produces just such an outcome when teachers are taught that social ideals should take precedence over learning.

Social promotion policies and cooperative learning are merely familiar examples of educational practices that make academic concessions to social concerns. Many less well-known methodologies called “best practices” are preferred for the same reason. They include heterogeneous grouping, multiage classes, and a variety of other teaching, curricular, and organizational stratagems. All sacrifice educational outcomes to social aims.

Teachers and administrators are not only taught priorities that are at odds with those of the public, but also are given to believe that the public’s ideas about education are unenlightened, if not harmful. An Education Week essay by Alan Jones (1998) reflected the prevailing view. According to Jones, “parents expect that their children will be educated just like they were.” In his view, the adoption of traditional educational practices—academic retention, for example—is a wrongful concession to the public’s ideas. Jones lamented the failure of the 1960s student movement to lastingly reshape the public’s thinking and suggested that school administrators push the envelope in a more student-centered direction. A similarly critical article by Alfie Kohn (1998) in *Phi Delta Kappan* argued that parents who insist on achievement for their children are selfish and an impediment to the success of other students.

The Gap Between Teacher-Educators and the Public Grows Wider

The gap between teacher-educators and the public is neither a transient phenomenon

nor one of recent origin. It is a subtle but critical disagreement about the nature and purpose of public education. Although obscured by a vast array of rapidly mutating jargon and methods, the core difference is that teacher educators do not agree with the public's educational priorities. The public takes a learning-centered or results-oriented view of education. Teacher-educators take a learner-centered or process-oriented view.

The learner-centered perspective holds that teaching is optimally effective only when it is accommodated to the social, psychological, and/or developmental needs of students. Thus, if students are thought to suffer from a lack of social justice in their lives, teachers are taught that the impediment must be alleviated before achievement can be expected.

Whether social injustice truly impedes learning and whether it is a problem that teachers can effectively address are questions that educators might be expected to ask but rarely do and perhaps for an understandable reason. For many educators, the theory that academic success depends on social justice explains one thing very well: it explains how so many teachers could be working so hard and using pedagogically correct teaching methods and yet having such little success with disadvantaged students. In other words, it offers a convenient excuse for teachers, administrators, and, not incidentally, for the professors of pedagogy. Taken to its logical conclusion, the social injustice explanation encourages teachers to think of academic failure as inevitable. Instead of promoting teachers to exhort students, it encourages them to sympathize with students as victims.

Similar transformations of the teacher's role take place in other variants of learner-centered teaching. The "developmentally appropriate" model featured in NCATE's latest standards is a classic example. Here teachers are taught that a student's stage of development critically limits that which he or she can learn. In theory, correctly fitted teaching will result in as much learning as current development permits, and academic challenges in excess of that level are likely to cause burnout and damaged self-esteem.

Again, it is an attractive theory to educators because it seems to explain why some students learn and others do not and it argues against overconcern with results. Despite its intuitive appeal, the concept that developmental stages are a valid guide to instruction and that "developmentally appropriate" instruction can optimize learning is supported mostly by theory, opinion, and anecdotal evidence—and for good reason: the stages are ill-defined and impracticably difficult to observe, and the recommended interventions are ad hoc and untested. Again, the theory is popular not because it enables teachers to produce results but because it explains why they may not be getting results.

Forms of learner-centered pedagogy such as developmentally appropriate practice are also attractive to students and parents because they promise academic success by natural, spontaneous, and inherently attractive means (Stone, 1996). They take the work out of schoolwork. Students are expected to dedicate their efforts to that which they find attractive and engaging, not that which results in meaningful academic achievement. In truth, it is a kind of pedagogical "snake oil" that became popular in an era when schools were ruled by the "hickory stick." It promises far more than it produces.

Over the years, myriad education reforms have sought improved achievement; yet all have somehow missed the mark. A central reason is that most of them have been designed, selected, and implemented by learner-centered educators. They have failed to significantly enhance achievement because they have viewed it as secondary and a by-product of efforts focused mainly on producing student satisfaction. In effect, they have failed to meet the public's expectations because their priorities have been the reverse of those desired by the public.

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and Teacher Training Reform

The NCTAF is leading a massive effort to encourage the adoption of NCATE's standards. Originally headed by North Carolina's Governor Hunt and directed by Professor Linda Darling-Hammond of Teachers College, Columbia University, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future is recommending that all states align their teacher licensure standards with NCATE's training standards and with the standards set by the

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards—advanced teacher certification standards already aligned with NCATE.

If the Commission succeeds, virtually all “approved” teacher training, licensure, and certification standards will reflect NCATE’s views and priorities, not the subject matter emphasis and dedication to achievement wanted by most policymakers and parents.

NCATE is an organization primarily comprised of teacher-education’s principal stakeholders, i.e., the parties who wrote the standards now in need of revision. No matter what changes or concessions are made—cosmetic or substantive—it may be safely predicted that accreditation governed by NCATE will be congenial to learner-centered teaching and antagonistic to achievement-oriented alternatives. NCATE’s stakeholders simply will not have it any other way. If policymakers want teacher training dedicated to achievement, they will have to set standards independent of NCATE.

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