Americans are school crazy. We take our education quite seriously. Ordinarily placid parents become passionate over some minor change in their school’s curriculum. We do not leave schooling to some powerful ministry of education. We want control of the school close to home, where we can get a handle on it. “Education is too important to leave in the hands of the professionals” is a strikingly American attitude. Besides underscoring the citizen’s sense of the importance of education, the statement reveals the low level of trust afforded teachers. (Could we imagine, for instance, “Medicine is too important to leave in the hands of physicians.”)

New Demands on Old Forms

In recent years, as American culture has undergone rapid changes, citizens have become increasingly restive about the schools’ and teachers’ ability to prepare children for the realities of modern life. Our mass educational system, which came into existence at the start of the Industrial Revolution now appears to be out of phase with the demands of a post industrial society. Then we needed our schools to turn out large numbers of print-literate, loyal, docile individuals who could function in a relatively stable industrial-social system. Now our society is said to need citizens who can effectively process large amounts of different kinds of data, who can work well both individually and in groups, who are ready for a life of continuous learning and relearning, and, also, who are able to live in a very fluid, technologically advanced society. These new demands on the schools, of course, put new pressures on our teachers and those who train teachers. The teacher is supposed to teach in a new way and help develop a new man, but he, himself, is a captive and a victim of the old educational forms.

Teacher Education: A Weak Treatment

The answer to this dilemma, and a typically American one at that, is to educate our teachers better initially. Or, as one Office of Education administrator said, “Let’s change the schools, by getting at the pollution upstream... teacher education.” This is a familiar theme in American life. In the last half century, there have been eleven major studies of teacher education in America, all of them condemning our system of training teachers and all recommending thorough-going, but conflicting, reform measures. In a way, teacher education has become higher education’s punching bag. Professors in the arts and sciences look down their noses at teacher educators as somehow not being respectable. The graduates of teacher education programs blame their mentors for not preparing them to cope with their classroom problems. Although university administrators are happy to have large teacher education programs when they go to the state legislators for money (“Our major task is to prepare highly skilled teachers for the state’s elementary and secondary schools”), this pride is not reflected by the university’s budget decisions which reflect an on-the-cheap approach to teacher education. No one is really happy about the way we do teacher education in this country. And the discontent seems to be growing.

One of the fundamental problems with the way we go about teacher education is that we are trapped by low expectations of what it takes to train a skillful teacher. In many states someone can become a teacher by taking four or five education courses and surviving a stint of student teaching. The failure in education courses and student teaching would lead one to believe that few are deeply tested and challenged by their training for teaching. These few educational experiences, however, are the professional training required of the future teacher. They are to play the dominant role in
teacher education's mission. That is, transforming reasonably intelligent and well-balanced college students into skilled teachers, prepared to take on the responsibility of classroom teaching. By "skilled teacher," most would agree that four areas of competence are essential. These are:

1. command of theoretical knowledge about learning and human behavior;
2. control of technical skills of teaching which appear to facilitate student learning;
3. display of attitudes which foster learning and genuine human relationships;
4. sureness and accuracy in the knowledge of subject matter to be taught.

To expect the achievement of even the first three of these general objectives from our present teacher training framework is to expect too much from too little. In gentler, slower times, if new teachers behaved like the majority of their own teachers they would be performing adequately. Now, we are trying to teach the habit of inquiry, to individualize instructions so that students take more responsibility for their own learning and, also, achieve this in a more open and less authoritarian classroom setting. All of these require much more fundamental behavior change on the part of the new teacher than we have hitherto acknowledged.

It is not simply that there are too few courses. Many programs of teacher preparation have massive course requirements in education but there is little evidence that superior teachers are trained this way. It may very well be that the fundamental mode of educating teachers is inappropriate, if not totally bankrupt. Teacher education is a creature of the universities and, as such, it adheres to the habits and foibles of the university; it is carried on in lecture halls; it is a highly verbal character; it is physically remote from the reality under study, i.e., children and schools. Success for the trainee is determined essentially by performance on paper and pencil tests. The result of all this is that teacher education has little impact on prospective teachers. In an experimental sense, it is a weak treatment. It may, indeed, be a placebo, a sugar pill treatment which does not change behavior.

Some research recently reported by James Popham of UCLA suggests that whatever teacher education is doing, it is not making prospective teachers particularly skillful in instruction. Popham compared three groups of teachers and non-teachers to see who could bring about the greater learning gains by students. The performance of students taught by certified teachers of auto mechanics and by working auto mechanics was compared. Also compared were the performances of students taught by certified teachers of electronics and working electricians; and social studies teachers and a group of undergraduates and housewives. Each paired group (i.e., certified teachers of auto mechanics and actual auto mechanics) was given the same teaching objectives and materials and told to plan to execute the objectives. Each group taught identical lessons to matched groups of high school students. The lesson averaged ten class hours and were followed by exams. When the performances of the students were analyzed, it was found that they learned the same amount from teachers as from non-teachers. This study suggests that graduates of teacher training programs have no special skills that distinguish them from others. It suggests further that while teacher education may be accomplishing something, it is not equipping future teachers with the special abilities to improve the learning of students.

What this research and much of the current criticism underscores is a crisis of content in teacher education. The traditional approaches to teacher training are not working. They are not providing the teacher trainee with a unique set of skills and attitudes to help him work with children. The exact effect of this weak training input is impossible to determine. Undoubtedly, much of the public dissatisfaction with what children achieve in school is related to the state of training of teachers. A more easily determined result is the high dropout rate in the teaching profession. According to Professor L. O. Andrews of Ohio State University, each year we graduate approximately 11,000 doctors and 330,000 teachers. At the end of five years, only a handful of the doctors have left the profession, but only 75,000 of the original 330,000 teachers are still in the classroom. The rest, for one reason or another, have dropped out. This loss of eighty percent of the trained teachers in a five year period not only weakens the profession, but provides a perfect justification for those who do not want to spend many of our resources on the education of teachers. Why spend heavily to carefully train teachers when they are such a poor investment? What, in fact, happens though, is that prospective teachers receive little real training, go into teaching with not enough competence to handle the job, fail or feel very inadequate and leave. This high turnover, then, is obvious rationalization to not waste money training teachers. It is a chicken or egg argument particularly as long as teacher
education is such a weak treatment. The argument has recently been severely undermined by a new and vital movement within teacher education: competency based teacher education.

Competency-Based Teacher Education

Competency or performance based teacher education is a growing movement within the teacher education community which essentially focuses on what the teacher can do to help children learn, not on what he knows. Competency based programs are designed on the premise that the program should prepare teachers to accomplish observable goals. The CBTE movement is founded on the following assumptions:

1. there are specific skills, strategies and dispositions which the beginning teacher should possess to be effective with children;
2. certain of these skills, strategies and dispositions should be chosen and made the core of the program of training;
3. the behaviors which constitute successful performance of each skill should be clearly stated and these should be the criteria of successful completion of the teacher education program;
4. since teacher education students differ one from the other, they should be able to move through the program at their own rate, depending on their ability to demonstrate mastery of the various skills.

Some Advantages

Competency based teacher education has many virtues. For one thing it brings a high degree of exactitude to an activity, the education of teachers, which is desperately needed. Teacher education, like much of education, has too often been encased in the headiest philosophic rhetoric. Programs claim to be guided by goals to “train scholar-teachers” or “educational catalysts,” but after a few paragraphs of description, it is unclear what a graduate of one of these programs is supposed to be able to do with children. When it is not clear how the teacher is to behave in a teacher-learning situation, it is difficult to develop a coherent training program to accomplish the program’s goals. CBTE, however, demands that philosophical puffs and psychological jargon be replaced, or at least undergirded, by a precise description of what the program is trying to accomplish.

A second and related virtue is that of clarity. CBTE programs have clear goals and this fact effects many aspects of the program. The presence of behavioral objectives and criterion-references measurement clarifies to the instructor what his component of the program should be accomplishing. In like manner, it clarifies to the prospective teacher what he is to accomplish, in each separate component and in the entire program. It also helps both the teacher and the taught realize when the trainee has achieved the instructional goals. This fact takes much of the waste out of teacher education programs.

A third advantage is the open and public quality of CBTE programs. A principal or superintendent hiring a graduate of such a program can check at a glance what the teacher has been trained to do. He can, also, hold the program more accountable for its graduate’s on the job performance because there has been a clear specification of what he can do. Further, students, teacher educators, and the general public can more easily take issue with a competency based program or particular components because of this public quality. If someone thinks that being able “to demonstrate mastery of four different techniques of teaching reading” is an inappropriate goal, or that it should be seven techniques, then he is able to address this issue within the framework of a CBTE program.

Some Unanswered Questions

For all its virtues and advantages, CBTE is still a new idea and has many unanswered questions. One of these is, “Competency at what?” At what is it that prospective teachers should be competent? Competency in passing paper and pencil tests on courses such as The Psychology of Learning? Competency at demonstrating some teacher behavior such as asking divergent questions? Or competency at bringing about specified levels of student achievement, such as a certain level of mastery in mathematics? At present, most of the work being done in competency based teacher education is concentrating on teacher behavior. The reason is that this is an easier level to work with, since the third level, student achievement, is very difficult to relate to any particular activity or behavior of the teacher. The result of this, then, is that CBTE programs are composed of lists of teaching skills and strategies which have a logical, but not empirically established, relationship with effective teaching. While this may be an improvement, it still makes the foundation of CBTE programs rather slippery.

Another aspect of the question, “Competency at what?” is that there has been a tendency in these programs to concentrate on minutiae, because it could be engineered into a competency based framework, and
ignore areas related to scholarship or the development of the teachers' humanness because they are more difficult to deal with. Currently, we lack the precise training techniques and the evaluative tools to deal rigorously with many of these fundamentally important areas, so they often are ignored. This problem tends to lower sights at easier targets.

Further, in our drive to get finally some precision and clarity in this troublesome job of training teachers, we may miss the point. We may forget that teachers are supposed to help children become rich human beings, that they should tend to the young an enticing invitation to participate in civilization. The teacher who has been finely trained to exhibit specific teaching behaviors under specific conditions may, indeed, miss the larger point of what it means to be a teacher. Teacher educators working with CBTE need a sense of perspective.

Finally, we must realize that we are at the beginning of the CBTE movement. We must not get carried away with what can be accomplished or the movement will become like programmed instruction and dozens of other fine ideas which were underdeveloped and oversold. Educators are like overeager fight managers who bring their gifted fighters along too fast. There are some early and easy victories, some wild claims and lots of publicity. Then comes the main event and they get their heads knocked off—never to be heard from again. We should not let this happen to CBTE.

We have too few promising ideas in teacher education to squander this one. There is much that competency based teacher education can do right now—and well. There is much that it cannot achieve. We need to know and respect these strengths and limitations. To ignore it, is to be ignorant. To overestimate it, may be fatal.

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