New Directions

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Special Report: Teacher Certification Issues

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By Mary E. Dilworth

These are trying times for educators. Allegations of mediocrity in the public school system are aimed at teachers and the institutions that train them. This societal demand for basic skills competence has forced additional and more stringent preparation and certification requirements. An increasing number of states, especially in the South, have established teacher certification examinations as a determining criterion for initial entry into and/or certification in the profession.

Minority students in general, but graduates of historically Black institutions in particular, are having a difficult time meeting recently imposed state test requirements. These requirements threaten to reduce the number of new minority classroom teachers and to have a devastating effect on Black institutions if changes are not made soon. Certain states, such as Florida, Alabama and Georgia, have initiated legislation stipulating that an institution will lose state program approval if it has a consistently high examination failure rate for teacher education graduates. A large number of Black colleges are susceptible to the adverse effects of these state regulations...

There is nothing inherently wrong with standards or tests. While the former are highly desirable, the latter can also be useful. Some tests are necessary in the diagnosis of problems and in the assessment of knowledge and skills. However, there are serious limitations to the present system that relies so heavily on examination performance. An actual test score seemingly has become more valuable and marketable than the education it represents.

The overemphasis on teacher certification tests promises to persist. Historically, Black teacher training institutions have no alternative but to adjust their curricula and programs in a manner that will substantially improve the performance of their students....

The teaching profession suffers more than its share of growing pains simply because the nation's educational system rarely enjoys a steady state for longer than a score of years. For well over a century, theorists, practioners and politicians have debated the purpose, means and methods necessary to train effective teachers.

The design of present teacher preparation and certification requirements represents durable elements of various past educational and political philosophies. Although it seems clear that the present methods are less than effective, today's educators are inclined to change rather than attempt to diffuse the latest competency trend.

In examining the history and development of teaching, we find a young profession that has yet to reach the same level of maturity as other groups, e.g., physicians, lawyers and engineers. To date, the teaching profession appears to lack the consistency of purpose, selectivity of members and accompanying prestige associated with other occupational fields. A brief look into the growth of the education enterprise offers a possible explanation.

Teacher Training Development

Prior to the American Revolution, few citizens viewed teaching as a craft, much less a profession. There were no standard requirements, and where local schools existed, lay committees used whatever criteria was deemed appropriate in certifying teachers. The occupation held little to no social status. It was not until the common school movement of the mid-19th century that teaching took the form of a profession.

The political decision that a basic education for "all" people would benefit the society as a whole — and also perpetuate the Protestant ethic — created a demand for more teachers. Consequently, the "normal school movement had for its principal object the fitting of common school teachers." The movement originated with the common people or those interested in the welfare of the masses.[1] Hundreds of normal schools, state teachers colleges and departments of education emerged from this era. However, the efforts of the latter group were guided by survivalists and competitive concerns.

Those espousing the normal school concept saw proper teacher training instruction as a combination of professional and academic preparation. Those who felt that normal schools should be limited to professional studies with basic skills being taught in the common schools were in the minority. Administrators contended that a good liberal education was adequate.

Although the first normal schools assisted in defining teaching as a profession, the quality of instruction was inferior to that provided in the better high schools. Designed to train common or elementary school teachers, normal schools had a particularly difficult time convincing the education community that they should be the primary facilitators for high school teachers. The normal schools were never quite able to compete with the then increasingly prestigious four-year college degree or the lure of a "scientifically" based university degree.

In 1873, the University of Iowa established the first permanent chair of pedagogy. By the turn of the century most major universities and colleges had established departments of education — Howard University was among the first.[2] By 1898, there were approximately 260 normal schools in the nation. However, they only graduated 25 percent of new teachers.[3]

The years 1890-1907 brought several important elements to the teaching field. During this period, educators recognized the necessity of pedagogy and the utility of standardized curricula. They also rejected the teaching-knowledge qualification and accepted the position that appropriate academic study, i.e., comprehensive review of subjects to be taught, was sufficient to train high school teachers. Pedagogical training was isolated from other phases of a teacher's education.[4]

From 1907 to 1933, educators emphasized the specification of competencies and qualifications that would purposively characterize the teacher as a technician. In addition, there was a phenomenal increase in the number of courses recommended for aspiring teachers. One author defines the "ideal teacher" of this period as one who possessed "the traits, knowledges and skills which scientific investigation would eventually reveal as necessary for performing the various duties involved in that type of position."[5]

The activities of this period closely parallel those of the 1970s accountability movement. . . . This philosophy of education is grounded in the notion that the objective, scientific approach to learning is desirable regardless of the unquantifiable nature of certain knowledge.

A high school diploma was accepted as a teaching credential well into the 20th century. Educators, attempting to meet the demand for teachers, determined that high schools and normal schools would supply elementary schoolteachers. Until the turn of the century, however, there were few distinctions between a high school and college education.

As late as 1910, the majority of children aged 14-17 who attended school were in elementary classes. Approximately 25 percent were over 18 years of age. Rigid age-grading as we know it today did not become important until elementary school was recognized as a necessary step to high school.[6]

Admission requirements were the same for both institutions, but were not based on academic accomplishment. Entry criteria were restricted by sex, religious beliefs, financing, basic literacy and race. Age was of no consequence and there were no standard program prerequisites or terms.[7] As a rule, high school and college students did not have the benefit of a full elementary education. Thus, the practice of providing remedial work for students through preparatory classes was quite common.[8]

Only with the rise of public high schools did formal education certification become prominent and an elementary school education essential. Colleges gained certification power through the sequential academic system as well, but not without change. In light of the then prevailing democratic stance towards educational opportunity, colleges were forced to abandon their elitist, classical curriculums and appeal to the scientific, utilitarian views of the nation.

The industrialization of the country and compulsory school attendance laws designed to restrict labor markets to adults encouraged the vocational education movement. Students would remain in school longer and acquire certain skills. School enrollments would increase also.[9] One discipline which suited postsecondary education's new vocational emphasis was teaching. The phenomenal increase in high school attendance justified college as a source of secondary teachers.

An entirely different system than that which accommodated other education institutions conditioned the nature of the some 600 schools for Blacks, established 50 years following the Civil War. The common school movement, which served as the foundation for a sequential education system, escaped the Black community. Following the Civil War, there were no public common schools or high schools for Blacks. Southern whites as well as Blacks were starting from scratch as that region did not entertain the idea of publicly-supported education until the 1870s. . . .

The Turning Point

It was not until the 1920s that teachers were required to go to school. Those aspiring to become educators had little incentive to attend normal schools or college, especially if they were equipped to pass a licensing examination. There are data to suggest that in some situations school attendance could be substituted for teacher certification and that at times one could secure a slightly better and higher paying job.[10] . . .

The educational requirements for teachers became more exact as the profession expanded. Still, only 10 percent of classroom teachers in 1931 had bachelor's degrees. By 1952 that figure was less than 50 percent.[11] By 1961, only 14.6 percent of public school teachers had less than a B.A. degree. In 1976, that group comprised less than one percent of the teaching population.[12]

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An increase in certification solely on the basis of college credentials and a decrease in certification via examination characterized this early period. Fortunately, this emphasis on academic preparation, as opposed to testing, was advantageous to Black teachers. Historically, Black teachers have been unable to achieve consistently the required results when quantitative test measures have been utilized. In fact, this very criterion may have deterred substantial decreases of Black teachers in the South during the integration years when more teachers in Black than in white schools were fully certified.[13]

Early teaching examinations were quite basic and were designed to cover the rudiments taught in the common schools. Subjects normally tested were orthography, reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, physiology, hygiene, and for a first or second grade certificate, some theory and practice of teaching.[14] With the increasing emphasis on teaching methods and knowledge, the inadequacies of examinations became more clear. Consequently, competency through observations, e.g., classroom performance and student teaching, dominated the new era.

In the quest for quality teachers, the process of certification was of near equal importance to setting academic requirements. Prior to the institutionalization of common schools, teaching appointments were made subjectively often on the basis of one's philosophy of life, race or national origin. Employment and certification were indistinguishable and used as political pawns. In 1898, only three states issued teaching certificates. Most states prescribed certain criteria and provided localities with discretionary power to administer them.[15] Needless to say, there was a great lack of uniformity.

Consequently, the population welcomed the notion of state certification. Standardized state certification requirements provided greater mobility in reciprocity and also began the process of certification by levels, i.e., elementary and secondary. Teaching, by virtue of government patronage, took cues from the emerging civil service reform. This public service system was characterized by uniform standards for screening applicants and standards which could be bureaucratically enforced.[16]

In keeping with tradition, the states still hold substantial power in the certification of teachers. The "approved program" approach is commonly practiced throughout the states. It requires that the state department of education approve professional education programs. State representatives make periodic checks, and requirements generally focus on subjects taught, qualifications of faculty, library holdings, etc. The approved college or university is then permitted to "recommend" its graduates for certification.

Until very recently, most students were pretty much assured certification by completing the teaching program of their approved college. This has changed with the reinstitution of certification examinations. In states with the testing requirement, a recommendation from the institution merely indicates that the student has completed the program. It does not imply that she/he has passed the examination.

Some states intend to utilize their program approval power as a means of improving teacher education. These states will omit from their approved lists an institution that consistently graduates substantial numbers of students who fail the certification examinations. This naturally presents a serious problem for Black colleges where passage rates generally are low. . . .

Accountability

The idea of competence strikes a note of approval in most minds. It is commonly assumed that individuals have a firm grasp on the tasks to which they are assigned and that they will be accountable for their actions. However, this is not always true.

In the past two decades, society has vigorously tried to identify mechanisms to gauge competence and assure accountability. Basic skills testing and competency-based education have emerged from these efforts. Teachers, as well as other professionals, have been forced to closely adhere to the dictates of competence and accountability, specifically, in the form of certification requirements. . . .

Educators and politicians of the 1970s will recall the thrust towards accountability. This concept was adopted during a period of fiscal crisis and social activism. It garnered conservative support in its promise of cost efficiency and liberal support with its pledge for quality education for all children. After coping with several turbulent years of open, community-based education and bearing the related costs, the public was receptive to an affair with accountability's delegate — competency-based education.

The competency- or performance-based approach to learning required a substantially different thought process than had been the norm for many educators. Its proponents set out to convince the public that most elements of knowledge could be observed and, thus, measured by behavior. A clearly defined behavior was considered the desirable end. In hindsight, it seems remarkable the public and educators embraced such a notion without complete thought to its implications.

Accountability in education is linked to 19th and 20th century theories of positivism, i.e., sound knowledge is scientifically based and therefore observable. Although natural scientists eventually dispelled this train of thought because of its limitation, it was resurrected to accommodate the political and economic agenda of the 1970s.[17]

The assumptions of this school, which helped frame the accountability/competency-based model of education, are indeed restrictive. Specifically, they presume that:

- learning can be adequately defined as change of behavior;
- learning, viewed as change of behavior, has been rendered observable and therefore testable through observation and measurement of behavioral performances;
- a common terminology is necessary; and
- methods and curricula must relate to behavioral observations in the same manner as means relate to ends.[18]

"Some states intend to utilize their program approval power as a means of improving teacher education."

Clearly, the most defective element of competency-based education is what [Don] Martin aptly defines as the "reduction fallacy." That is, when taken as a whole, the directives of accountability suggest that learning is comprised of only that which has been previously stipulated.

The institutionalization of competency-based practices, standards and measures may be attributed to state and local politicians and economists who, over a decade ago, were seeking relief from the high costs of education. There was the inherent burden of administrating numerous federal education programs. And, teacher salaries were also escalating with union assistance. The latter condition infers that emphasis on a "teacher surplus" and enthusiasm for accountability were contrived for economic benefit. Several of today's controversial state student and teacher basic skills examinations were mandated during this period.

Teachers are an essential element of educational accountability. By design, however, they are often both champions and victims of the cause. During the 1970s, student teachers were taught to develop objectives in "behavioral terms," to construct lesson plans in "modules," and to measure learning (i.e., behavior) at certain percentage "points of proficiency." By the same token, these teachers would eventually be judged on their own learning and by their students' ability to meet the predetermined criteria.

Testing was a significant part of this scenario. Objections to education based solely on measurable results were muted. As agents of the states, teachers were consigned to a system which it appeared would either reward or punish them. . . .

After a 10 year reprieve, it seems that many of the educational accountability schemes of the late 1960s and early 1970s will return, possibly with less fervor. An educational system supported by competent and reliable teachers is certainly a desirable condition. However, a system solely dependent on quantifiable measures serves to stifle creativity and change, thereby preventing improvement. This has an adverse effect on classes of people seeking equality in a disparate society.

However intended, this nation's educational system fosters new thinking and ideas. Various constituencies, such as Blacks and the poor, recognize it as a vehicle for individual and societal change. Accountability, as stated, does not lend itself to this concept. There is virtually no room for learning for learning's sake, no creative element. It is this gap that may consume the aspirations of upwardly mobile people.

Tests

Tests are a natural companion to competency practices. Despite the inherent weaknesses in this assessment approach, competency testing of teachers and students has penetrated the educational arena. On the surface, it appears that academicians have accepted this concept on blind faith. In actuality, testing's authority is derived from the political sphere of influence. As a result, prospective teachers in more than 50 percent of the states are, or will be, confronted with mandated certification examinations within the next five years.[19]. . .

Examinations have manifest and latent uses. They are commonly acknowledged for their diagnostic qualities in basic skills knowledge, ability and even behavioral areas. However, matters of test purpose

and worth become more significant when used as a determinant tool in decisions regarding admissions, certification, and employment selection. While there are undoubtedly some positive and constructive uses for certain examinations and quantitative measures in education, the benefits of testing have escaped the majority of Black people. . . .

Test developers appear to be making a concerted effort to be relevant and fair. No certification examination purports to determine an individual's ability to teach. The exams merely seek to measure a person's own knowledge of what the experts consider to be the necessary basic skills. It appears, therefore, that the prime malefactor is not the test itself but the credential-laden social system which intentionally or unintentionally fails to prepare certain individuals to cope with it.

Those in the testing business tend to know the limitations of their product. The public does not. To allay the concerns of their constituents, politicians and some educators offer tests as the cure-all of educational ills. Hence there is a phenomenal rate of increase of teacher competency examinations. It is clear that a reliance on testing is established regardless of its deficiencies.

According to a survey conducted by J. T. Sandefur, 36 states test teacher competencies in some manner, while 28 states test or plan to test teachers prior to certification.[20] In addition, the number of states which test or plan to test students prior to admission to teacher training programs is increasing.

Recognizing this trend as a new market, ETS [Educational Testing Service] has already developed the Pre-professional Skills Tests of Reading, Writing and Mathematics (PPST). Its purpose is "to provide information about basic proficiency in communication and computational skills."[21]. . .

The testing movement has regional characteristics, and the South is clearly the front-runner. All Southern states test prospective teachers, although several have yet to establish cut-off scores. The Southern states were among the first to use tests of basic skills for entry in teacher education programs, to use competency tests of basic and professional skills as qualifiers for initial certification, and to tie recertification to continuing education and on-the-job performance.[22,23]

According to the Council of Chief State School Officers (COCSSO), the South also has moved more nimbly than other regions. COCSSO describes movement in the Mid-Atlantic and West (excluding California, Texas and Oklahoma) as slow and cautious, while Midwestern activity seems to be non-existent.

There could be any number of reasons for the South's progressive action. The COCSSO suggests that the work of the Southern Regional Education Board may be a contributing factor. This 34-year-old consortium provides data to its member states on the condition of education in that region. As an economically sluggish area for decades, it may be possible that this acceleration represents a game of catch-up.

Nevertheless, the Southern region's emphasis on competency testing for teachers is particularly significant for historically Black institutions. Most are located in this region and their students tend to be unable to cope with the testing requirements.

The research data on minority teacher test performance is limited and conflicting. Different state instruments and performance scales preclude cumulative analyses, and the source of data varies. Since test administrators such as ETS submit scores only to the students, state performance data must be computer based on the reports of the students or of the college or university (reflecting again the reports of students) to the state agency.

Media reports should also be scrutinized. A headline stating that all teacher education students of a particular minority institution have failed an examination appears less fatal when the actual number of students taking the exam reflects a very small percent of prospective minority teacher candidates in that state. Also, the enrollment size of various historically Black institutions is significant. In some instances, the inability of many students in a large institution to pass an exam will naturally force the average minority pass rate down, circumstantially indicting the smaller institutions which may have a reputable pass rate.

The data also conflict on specific problem areas. Some sources indicate that Black students do poorly on the basic skills portion of these tests, i.e., simple reading, writing and calculating. Others cite the absence of test-taking skills as the culprit. Whatever the weak achievement areas, all Black students do not suffer the same deficiencies. . . .

It is likely that historically Black institutions will make overall adjustments in teacher training programs to meet this new reality. However unsettling, some schools have already begun the process. . . . □

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