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ABSTRACT

This discussion is based on the assumption that current practice in teacher education is not working very well, but that teacher education programs can be considerably improved with some relatively minor changes. It is important that solutions for the problems identify critical weaknesses in current practice that can be overcome with relatively modest and inexpensive reforms. Chief among suggested recommendations is one for earlier field experience. Different but related reasons for implementing classroom practice very early in the training process are: (1) to develop a base of concrete perceptual images of classroom life on which later theoretical knowledge can be built; (2) to accelerate the passage through the developmental stages of teacher concerns; (3) to help the novice decide early whether he wants to be a teacher, and (4) to reduce the number of functions student teaching is expected to fulfill. It is stated that early practice should be an intense and realistic experience recognizing the limitations of the student teacher and the functions he can be expected to perform. The chief drawbacks to early teaching experience seem to be the lack of a model of a good teacher and the danger of adopting an apprenticeship program. (JMF)

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Student Teaching: First Course in Teacher Education?

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To proclaim that teacher education is in a state of crisis is to echo what every other critic is saying. Even insiders -- deans and professors of education -- are anxious to make it known that they too have lost faith in current practice. At the same time the literature abounds with proposals for reform.[1] Each proposal seems to be more comprehensive, more sweeping than its predecessors.

I begin with the assumption that current practice is not working very well but that it can be considerably improved with some relatively minor changes. Furthermore, radical alterations in professional training are likely to be overly expensive and extraordinarily hard to implement, much as are other large scale attempts to alter educational institutions.[2] The best balance between maximizing the improvement of professional training and minimizing cost and the risk of implementation problems is an approach which identifies critical weaknesses in current practice that can be overcome with relatively modest and inexpensive reforms.

Critique of Current Practice

Classroom teachers tend to see their professional training as being irrelevant, boring, repetitious, fractionalized.[3] Those who have taught in Schools of Education should not be surprised by these responses. After all, the same complaints are voiced by students to professors during the course of professional training.

What I find surprising is that professors of education do not seem to care how teachers in training or experienced teachers react to their preservice preparation. Rare is the college faculty committee that consults with teachers as it reformulates the program of professional training. Teachers are well aware of their lack of involvement in professional preparation and are starting to assert that universities must share the training responsibility with the entire teaching profession.

Teachers are increasingly willing to offer "suggestions" which they believe would improve teacher preparation. One of the most frequently expressed ideas is the call for earlier field experiences. A recent NEA Task Force, for example, proclaimed that "students need early and continuous experience in interaction with children."[4] Similar recommendations are usually voiced whenever teachers and administrators discuss teacher preparation with professors of education.

While professors of education are not necessarily opposed to early field experiences, the advocacy of this policy by classroom teachers forces these professors to consider the old theory-practice issue from a new perspective. Typically, educators have debated the relative emphasis to be placed on educational theory and practice or the type of educational theory to be included in professional training. It is unusual to ask the question implicit in the recommendation for early field experiences: In what sequence should we arrange the activities, practical and theoretical, of a teacher education program?

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A few educators have posed the question of sequence. One who has raised this issue believes that prospective teachers are psychologically ready for educational theory only if they are concurrently teaching. Another contends that students often view education courses negatively because they lack the teaching experience to evaluate what is being offered.[5] Students themselves have recommended that methods courses either be concurrent with or after practice teaching.[6] Yet the dominant theory is that theory ought to precede practice, and no one feels it necessary to defend this sequence.

The question which currently monopolizes the attention of teacher educators is the search for teacher competencies. Many have not even waited for the answer before they have instituted new programs and state certification procedures. Optimism abounds. Little recognition is given to the fact that the modern searchers for teacher competencies are traveling a trail which has been followed unsuccessfully for 80 years by such luminaries as Rice, Babbitt, Charters, Waples, Barr, and Gage.[7] The time is ripe to formulate new questions for teacher education.

One such question is the sequence of theoretical and practical activities in a pre-service teacher education program. That this question is a legitimate one is the topic of the following section. To establish its legitimacy, I will attempt to cast doubt on the well-established assumption that educational theory must precede classroom practice.

Practice Before Theory?

Four different, but related, considerations suggest that classroom practice could come very early in the training of a teacher. These factors include the need to develop a base of concrete perceptual images of classroom life on which later theoretical knowledge can be built, to accelerate the passage through the developmental stages of teacher concerns, to help the novice decide early whether he wants to be a teacher, and to reduce the number of functions student teaching is expected to fulfill. Each of these considerations is examined in detail.

While the dominant view is that educational theory informs and guides classroom practice, it is also possible to view practice as making theory concrete and understandable. In an observational study of student teaching, William Connor and Louis Smith found that student teaching provided novices with a vast array of concrete perceptual images and that the novices eagerly sought out any experience which might reveal a new aspect of the teaching role. At the start of their work, student teachers had limited perceptual images, particularly as these images appear from the perspective of the teacher. Beginning student teachers just do not know much about the teacher's perceptual world.[8]

Prospective teachers usually believe that they are familiar with the working world of the teacher. After all, they have spent most of their life in schools; however, they underestimate the differences between the role demands made of the teacher and those made of the student. To be responsible for organizing and directing classroom instruction is not at all the same as responding to that instruction. Since the theoretical part of professional education typically precedes practice, novices are forced to graft teaching theory on top of student-oriented perceptual images. No wonder education courses often fail, even when the theoretical content is of outstanding quality.

The implication is clear; teaching experience need not wait until the end of professional training. As Smith concludes: "The high number of varying raw perceptions that are created [by early experience] . . . may be most appropriate as a sort of 'background experience' . . . You do what you can and you pick up what you can and in between that experience, or concurrent with it, you take the related courses in the theory of pedagogy."[9] Similarly, a student at the end of her professional training notes: "How much more I might have learned if the education courses were taken after student teaching. After student teaching I had much more of an idea of what I needed than I had prior to the teaching apprenticeship."

In addition to giving the novice an understanding of the teacher role, early teaching experience can also accelerate the development of mature teacher concerns. The existence of a developmental model of teacher concerns is well documented by research at the R and D Center for Teacher Education at the University of Texas. The model includes three major phases of concerns: about self, about self as teacher, and about pupils. The first phase, typical of students prior to teaching experience, is marked by conventional adolescent concerns: grades, parental relationships, choice of vocation, and self-identity. Concerns about self as teacher tend to arise during initial teaching experience or in anticipation of that experience. These concerns focus on such questions as: What is expected of me as a teacher? How adequate am I? How do pupils feel about me? The last, and most mature, level of concern is characteristic of experienced superior teachers. Examples of concerns about pupils are: Are pupils learning what I am teaching? Are pupils learning what they need? Other research done on teacher concerns tends to substantiate these findings of Frances Fuller and her colleagues at Texas.[10]

Professional work in education often fails to match the concern level of the novice. Much of the content of education courses is aimed at level three, concerns about pupils, while the typical student is concerned about herself or himself as teacher. As Fuller observes: "While her education professors were trying to teach her about instructional objectives, she was wishing for some hints about discipline. While they were teaching measurement and evaluation she was wondering whether she could pass the test her [illegible]! In short, she was working on one kind of problem inside herself, while the program was helping her with a problem she just did not have yet."[11]

Fuller's developmental stages have several implications for professional training. Although the concerns model does not help select what content ought to be taught to a prospective teacher, it does suggest that whatever content is chosen should be sequenced to correlate with the level of concern. In addition a teacher education program could contain activities which arouse in a novice higher level concerns. One economical procedure toward this end is an early, brief teaching experience with follow-up supervisory and counseling sessions.[12] More extensive teaching experiences would also be possible.

A third potential value of early teaching experience is the role student teaching plays in choosing a teaching career. Many novices do not know whether they want to be teachers until after student teaching. For them student teaching is not so much a time to perfect teaching skills or to test out educational theories as it is a time to try on an occupational role to see if it fits.

Many prospective teachers are shocked to discover in the last semester of their senior year that they either do not enjoy or are not successful at teaching. Some no doubt go into teaching anyway, largely because they are

unprepared to do anything else. Such an outcome is inexcusable, particularly because it is unnecessary. An intensive teaching experience very early in the professional sequence would help novices make a vocational decision. If pursuing a different occupation seems wise, then there is sufficient time to seek the appropriate training. Since the experience would be in the first year or two of college, the education faculty should be able to be candid on its appraisal of the work of prospective teachers.

One word of caution: not any teaching experience will suffice. The form of the experience must be close enough to regular classroom teaching to enable the prospective teacher to make a judgment about a teaching career. While the experience probably does not need to be full-time, it should either get the novice in a classroom daily or engage him in day-long activity on a periodic basis. The activities need to span the range of those carried out by a classroom teacher, including responsibility for making curriculum decisions and implementing these decisions. Realistic exposure to the teaching role should not wait until student teaching or, as it does in some cases, the first year of teaching.

The fourth and last reason for early teaching experience is difficult to summarize in a phrase or a sentence. Briefly, the point is that student teaching, in its current placement at the end of professional training, serves so many functions that none are served well. Professors of education see student teaching as an opportunity to convert theory into practice. Prospective employers expect student teaching to weed out the incompetents. Lastly, the student views student teaching as a test of whether s/he can survive in the teaching role and an opportunity to learn the skills needed by the beginning teacher.

Research evidence suggests that skill development and survival needs take precedence over the other functions of student teaching. Instead of converting theory into practice, the student teachers studied by Lawrence Iannaconne were much more likely to adopt classroom practices that "worked." In many cases classroom practices discouraged by college training were not only used by the novices, but enthusiastically endorsed. The critical question for the student teachers is: "Does it [a teaching procedure] work to solve the immediate problem at hand?"[13] The need to survive is strong.

A related finding of the Connor and Smith study is that each novice seemed to have a unique "major problem" which occupied much of his attention. For one novice the major problem might be a survival one, e.g., establishing control, while another person might have a more sophisticated major problem, e.g., the language problems of children and what to do about these difficulties. The attention of a student teacher was so riveted on the major problem that Connor and Smith suggest: "We would hypothesize that one consequence of the 'major problem' is that its solution takes precedence over other items to be learned."[14] Placing the findings of Iannaconne beside those of Connor and Smith yields a picture of a student teacher preoccupied by specific problems and searching for pragmatic solutions to these problems.

Not only does student teaching fail to facilitate the transfer of theory into practice, but in addition student teaching does not distinguish among differing levels of performance. Only a few students receive a "C" and hardly anyone fails. At best, student teaching enables the novice to learn a few practical skills, though even this outcome is accompanied by considerable anxiety and frequent clashes of personality and teaching philosophy.[15]

To summarize, four considerations indicate that teaching practice could come very early in professional training. Early practice is needed to develop concrete perceptual images, to accelerate the development of more mature concerns, to make a career decision, and to reduce the number of demands currently made on student teaching. But what kind of practice, for what purposes, under what organization? These questions are addressed next.

The Nature of Early Practice

For several reasons early practice should be a relatively intense and realistic experience. Intensity and realism are necessary if the novice is to develop teacher-oriented perceptual images, if s/he is to taste enough of the rewards and frustrations of teaching to make a career decision, and if s/he is to decide whether s/he can survive in the teaching role. For these goals to be accomplished, the prospective teacher must be engaged in the same tasks that characterize the activity of the career teacher. Observing, tutoring, or handling a few small groups is insufficient, unless one wants to prepare for a career as an assistant to a teacher.

Yet insisting that a novice, with no work in professional education, immediately assume the responsibilities of a full-fledged teacher seems unthinkable. Will s/he be ready for that responsibility? Will schools be willing to turn over a class of youngsters to a college freshman or sophomore? How can a college student schedule extensive time to teach and still carry academic work on campus? These questions raise serious issues which suggest that something less than total teaching responsibility is the most feasible arrangement.

A reasonable compromise is the well-established transitional stage between the status of student and that of teacher: student teaching. Student teaching has the virtue of being fairly realistic--a student teacher is supposed to assume full control of a class at some point in his experience--and at the same time of limiting the risk--the supervising teacher is there in case the novice is unable to cope with the teaching situation. The amount of student teaching can also be regulated to take into account the campus activities of a college student.

The scheduling and supervision of early practice teaching can be organized to meet local circumstances. For a university with nearby schools, the best arrangement may be half-day student teaching or full-day teaching several times a week. Other universities may need to schedule full-day teaching, possibly for a portion of a quarter or a semester; the remainder of the quarter or semester might be devoted to one or more of the foundations or methods courses. The supervision of day-to-day teaching can reside largely with the supervising teacher who is best situated to give immediate feedback on teaching performance and judge when the novice is ready for more responsibility. A university professor who is not involved in the immediate situation should be available to help the novice clarify his/her reactions to the teaching experience.

At the end of early practice, the "student teacher" ought to be ready to decide whether to complete a teacher preparation program. To help make this judgment the person who has served as supervising teacher should carefully evaluate successes and difficulties the novice experienced on the job. This evaluation, probably in writing, along with the student's perceptions and reactions to teaching, could be the major input to an individual counseling

session conducted by the university professor responsible for supervising the early teaching experience.

If a student decides to pursue a teaching career, s/he can also use the counseling session to identify areas in which s/he needs academic or professional education beyond what is minimally required. Typical examples include work in public speaking, assertive training, and communication skills as well as additional subject matter preparation. All too often such deficiencies are discovered late in the senior year when it is too late to overcome them while still in college.

A student who chooses to become a teacher after having done early practice teaching has several advantages over his/her counterpart who experiences theory before practice. S/he needs less clinical work in subsequent professional education courses since s/he has already developed a storehouse of concrete perceptual images. In addition his/her level of concern is more likely to be congruent with professional education courses than would be the case for someone without early student teaching. Consequently, subsequent professional education work is easier to conduct and has more meaning for those who have had early teaching experience.

Those students who decide not to go into teaching should have adequate time to choose another career. They would, moreover, have developed insight into the operation of schools. This information cannot help but be useful to them in their future roles as parents and citizens. At the same time they would have learned something about themselves, e.g., how they respond under interpersonal pressure, whether they enjoy working in a bureaucratic institution, the extent to which they value autonomy of decision-making and action. Early student teaching can simultaneously act as a career decision point, a source of self-knowledge, and a glimpse into the inner workings of schooling in America.

Some Cautions

The proposal to have early student teaching leaves several major problems in teacher education unresolved. This proposal does not contain either an explicit or implicit model of the good teacher, a model that is needed to guide the selection of content in liberal and professional education. Neither does early student teaching guarantee that professional education will be an integrated whole rather than a series of loosely related experiences, as is so often the case. Indeed early teaching experience may magnify the discrepancies between the clinical and campus aspects of professional education, particularly if those handling the campus portion are out-of-touch with schools or are unable to relate their instruction to school realities.

Some educators believe that campus instruction should not be closely tied to school realities. To do so, they argue, is to embrace an apprenticeship conception of teacher education. This conception, critiqued first by John Dewey, concentrates on equipping teachers with the skills needed to practice the craft of teaching. The critics of the apprenticeship conception assume that such an orientation inhibits the future professional growth of the teacher. "The teacher," notes Dewey, "who leaves the professional school with power in managing a class of children may appear to superior advantage the first day . . . or even the first year, as compared with some other teacher who has a much more vital command of the psychology, logic, and ethics of development. But later 'progress' may . . . consist only in perfecting and refining skill already possessed."[16]

What Dewey failed to recognize is that the prospective teacher initially has a cluster of very practical concerns and that more mature concerns can develop only after the practical ones are confronted and resolved. While early teaching experience does not guarantee that the novice will go beyond survival or apprenticeship concerns, early experience does make it possible for this outcome to occur. On the other hand, delaying teaching experience until the end of a teacher education program forces the typical novice to maintain the apprenticeship orientation throughout the period of training. Consequently, the fear that early experience would promote an apprenticeship conception of teaching seems unjustified.

Early teaching experience, however, does not have a built-in conception of good teaching nor does it assure that professional training will be an integrated whole. The best that early experience can do is to provide prospective teachers with an understanding of the teacher role; novices, if they so choose, can use this knowledge to challenge teacher preparation programs which they find to be repetitious, fragmented, or directionless. Most programs need such a challenge, and early teaching experience enables the challenge to occur while the students are in preparation rather than after they have completed their training. The ultimate responsibility for developing integrated, purposeful programs belongs to professors of education, but evidence suggests they need to be prodded into confronting this issue.

On balance early teaching experience seems to offer enough advantages for it to be attempted on a trial basis. Such experimentation should also be attuned to unanticipated consequences, particularly if these consequences are negative. Only then will we know for sure whether early teaching experience is one of those modest reforms which produces a significant improvement in teacher education.

Footnotes

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