

Learning to Teach Nothing in Particular

A Uniquely American Educational Dilemma



BY DAVID K. COHEN

When inspectors visit construction sites to assess the quality of work, they do so against the building code, which typically is written out in detail and used to guide work and teach apprentices. When attending physicians supervise interns as they take patients' histories or check their blood pressure, they compare the interns' work with established procedures, many of which are written

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down and used to guide work and teach novices. In these cases and many others, the assessment of quality in workers' performance is framed by and conducted in light of occupational standards.

That is not the case for teaching in U.S. K-12 schools. There are no common standards against which teachers' performance could be judged and no inspections of their performance in light of such standards. There have been standards of a sort (i.e., checklists of questionable quality), but they have not focused on performance in sufficient detail to discriminate acceptable from unacceptable work. If we want to understand teacher preparation, development, and assessment in the United States, we must explain this unusual situation.

Because local control and weak government were the foundations of U.S. public education, most of our school systems never developed the common instruments that are found in many national school systems (and, to be fair, in a few U.S. subsystems).

These include a common curriculum or curriculum frameworks, common examinations tied to the curriculum, teacher education grounded in learning to teach the curriculum that students are to learn, and a teaching force whose members succeeded in those curriculum-based exams as students, among other things. Teachers who work with such infrastructure have instruments that they can use to set academic tasks tied to curriculum and assessment. They have a common vocabulary with which they can work together to identify, investigate, discuss, and solve problems of teaching and learning. Hence, they can have professional knowledge and skill, held in common.

The existence of such infrastructure does not ensure excellent or effective education; that depends on how well it is designed and how educators use it. Use can be influenced by agencies that oversee practice and shape quality; the chief example is inspector-

reate) have tested whether students learned what they were supposed to have been taught. In the early 1900s, when E. L. Thorndike and his colleagues and students invented tests of students' academic performance, they devised tests that were designed to be independent of any particular curriculum. Nonetheless, those tests, and more recently developed similar tests, were and are used to assess students' progress in learning. That has to rank as one of the strangest creations in the history of education.[†]

Teacher education is a second anomaly: absent a common curriculum, teachers-in-training could not learn how to teach it, let alone how to teach it well. Hence, teacher education consists of efforts to teach future teachers to teach no particular curriculum. This is very strange, since to teach is always to teach something, but the governance structure of U.S. education has long forbidden the specification of what that something would be. For the most

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ates, whose staff visit schools and classrooms, assess quality, offer advice, and help to improve practice. Use also can be influenced by standards for entry to the occupation, requirements for education and training, and criteria for promotion. In some national systems, promotion and tenure depend on the demonstration of competent practice in the classroom.

One other salient feature of such infrastructure is that it can inform assessment of teaching. Given a common curriculum and teacher education grounded in the curriculum, it is possible to devise standards of teaching quality that are referenced to teaching that curriculum. It is possible to devise standards that specify which elements of the subject should be taught, when or in what order they might most fruitfully be taught, and even how they can be taught more or less well. It is also possible to create standards for students' performance that are grounded in the curriculum.

Because there is no common infrastructure for U.S. public education,* it has developed several anomalous features. One of the most important concerns testing: because there is no common curriculum, it is impossible to devise tests that assess the extent of students' mastery of that curriculum. So, even though we've been testing student learning for nearly 100 years, only isolated programs (such as Advanced Placement and International Baccalau-

part, teacher education has been accommodating: typically, teacher candidates are taught how to teach no particular version of their subjects. That arrangement creates no incentives for those training to be teachers to learn, relatively deeply, what they would teach, nor does it create incentives for teacher educators to learn how to help teacher candidates learn how to teach a particular curriculum well. Instead, it offers incentives for them to teach novices whatever the teacher educators think is interesting or important (which often is not related to what happens in schools) or to offer a generic sort of teacher education. Most teachers report that, after receiving a teaching degree, they arrived in schools with little or no capability to teach particular subjects.

Textbooks have developed along similar lines. Absent guidance from an established curriculum, or even, until very recently, standards or curriculum frameworks, publishers have had incentives to produce texts that cover anything that *might* be taught in a given subject and grade. As knowledge accumulated and conceptions of how it might be taught grew more diverse, textbooks grew as well; some now far exceed what could be dealt with seriously in a year.

Many efforts to write academic standards have followed this pattern: standards have grown to include such a range of topics that no teacher or school system could possibly deal with all or even most of what was included. Two agencies have studied stan-

*Some elements of this infrastructure are found in some U.S. subsystems. One example is the Advanced Placement (AP) program in secondary schools. AP courses have common curriculum frameworks and common examinations, and students' AP exam scores can make a difference for college admission and course placement. But the AP program has never used these elements for teacher assessment.

[†]For a recent discussion of the consequences of such tests, see "What Bernie Madoff Can Teach Us about Accountability in Education," by Walter M. Stroup in the March 18, 2009, issue of *Education Week*.

dards, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and the American Federation of Teachers. Both strongly support standards-based reform, but both have found most standards to be mediocre at best. Absent a common curriculum, educators, publishers, and interested others have no incentive to limit themselves to what is usable in common; rather, they have incentives to include what might be used somewhere by some significant segment of the profession or market.

One result of these developments, evident in several cross-national assessments, is a distinctive U.S. approach to textbooks and many academic standards: they are a mile wide and an inch deep. Many topics are “covered,” but quickly and superficially.

a balanced instructional program that includes an emphasis on use of letter/sound relationships (phonics), context (semantic and syntactic), and text that has meaning for students.”³

These NCATE/ACEI standards nicely exemplify the American educational dilemma: how to set standards for teaching when the essential element, the curriculum to be taught, is nowhere to be found. The result is a generic recitation of processes and topics, with references to “competence” and “balance,” that lack any educational content. One cannot say that these standards are wrong, for they are too generic to be right or wrong. But one also cannot say that they offer more than the most vapid guidance for quality in teaching reading, writing, and oral language in elemen-



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Students’ knowledge and academic skills are thin compared with students from other nations that have a common curriculum and do *not* organize schooling around generic teaching, learning, and testing.¹

Standards of Teaching Quality

Lacking an educational infrastructure to rely on, teacher assessment has also been generic, as have standards for the colleges and departments of education that educate teachers. The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is the chief organization that sets standards to accredit education schools and departments, and so it *tried* to set standards of teaching. But the result is uninspiring. For instance, the NCATE standard for reading, writing, and oral language in programs of elementary education is: “Elementary teachers demonstrate a high level of competence in use of English language arts, and they know, understand, and use concepts from reading, language, and child development to teach reading, writing, speaking, viewing, listening, and thinking skills and to help students successfully apply their developing skills to many different situations, materials, and ideas.”²

Every term in that one-sentence standard requires definition in order to be useful for any purpose, including mere understanding, but no definitions are offered. NCATE does, however, refer readers who seek explanation to the “Elementary Education Standards and Supporting Explanation” devised and published by the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI). Although ACEI offers a “supporting explanation” of the NCATE standard for reading, writing, and oral language, it is only a little less generic. In several paragraphs, one of its most specific statements is still quite vague: “Candidates teach children to read with

ary schools. Such standards offer little that might inform teacher assessment. They do, however, prompt the key question for teacher assessment in the United States: how can teaching quality be assessed when there is no common curriculum, no agreement on what should be taught? This is the educational equivalent of asking how the quality of plumbing could be judged absent the building code that sets out standards for the quality of materials and operations.

For most of our history, those responsible for schools and school systems answered this question in ways that were more political than educational: states and localities set their own standards for teaching quality, using methods and measures they deemed appropriate. That was consistent with the disjointed systems that Americans invented to govern public education, and with the absence of any educational infrastructure that could inform standards of quality. For the most part, states and localities have sought to regulate educational quality based on crude measures of school inputs. Recent efforts to graft outcome-oriented approaches to the assessment of teaching quality onto that crude system are a mismatch. Among other things, they rely on tests that testing experts have long been telling us were *not* designed to assess the quality of teaching.

There are serious technical problems to improved assessment of quality in teaching, but the central problems are not technical. They are political and educational. Public education in the United States lacks the elements of a viable system with which to assess the quality of teaching, including a common curriculum, common criteria of performance in teaching tied to the curriculum, and, therefore, the capability to inspect and improve teaching. There are serious technical problems in the construction of a

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Teacher Preparation

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coherent educational system, but the chief barriers are mobilizing political support for such an approach and agreeing on its educational content. The infrastructure to which I refer is not radical or unfamiliar for education throughout the world; it is only radical in the United States.

The Common Core State Standards Initiative (see www.corestandards.org) could help chart a way out of these difficulties. To date, it has focused on academic standards and tests, but at least some of the founding ideas saw standards as the first step in a process of building several elements of educational infrastructure, including aligned assessments, texts, and perhaps curriculum or curriculum frameworks. The standards have gotten good reviews, even from some likely skeptics, and work has begun on two systems of assessment. It remains to be seen whether the assessments will be well designed and how well they will be tied to the standards. “Alignment” has become a standard bit of education jargon since 1994, when both the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the Improving America’s Schools Act were signed into law,[†] but it has been little explored; I have found, for instance, no criteria with which to judge the quality and extent of alignment between tests and standards. It also remains to be seen whether a curriculum or curriculum frameworks will be devised, and if devised, how well aligned they will be with assessments and standards. Even if all these things are accomplished, it remains to be seen whether publishers will produce quality materials that are tied closely to curriculum frameworks. And if all of these steps were taken, there would remain the last and largest problem: how can we enable those who teach and intend to teach to learn to use these educational resources to good effect, and how can we build systems of teacher education to enable that learning? Constructive answers to these questions would require extensive redesign of teachers’ work, to build into schoolwork many more opportunities to learn, and to ground teacher education in practice.

The political and educational barriers are not trivial, yet absent a common curriculum, common assessments, common measures of performance, and teacher education tied to these things, it will be terribly difficult to devise technically valid and educationally usable means to judge and act on teaching performance. Building a coherent educational system would be a large task, but not nearly as daunting as trying to solve our educational problems without building such a system. Without standards and measures of quality practice—grounded in linked curriculum, assessments, and teacher education—it will be impossible to build a knowledgeable occupation of teaching, and a knowledgeable occupation is the only durable solution to the problem of quality in teaching. □

Endnotes

1. William H. Schmidt, “Too Little Too Late: American High Schools in an International Context,” in *Brookings Papers on Education Policy 2002*, ed. Diane Ravitch (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2003).

2. National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), *Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation Institutions* (Washington, DC: NCATE, 2008), 54.

3. Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), *Elementary Education Standards and Supporting Explanation* (Olney, MD: ACEI, 2007), 5.

[†]To learn more about both acts, see www.archives.nysed.gov/edpolicy/research/res_essay_clinton_outline.shtml.