



Volume: 3 Number: 1

Date: March 16, 2006

Fwd:

Arresting Insights in Education

Subject:

Teacher Education: Coming Up Empty

By: Kate Walsh

The nation's leading teacher educators have produced an exhaustive review of the impact that formal teacher education has on teachers. *Studying Teacher Education*—a voluminous report of the American Educational Research

There is presently little empirical evidence to support the methods used to prepare the nation's teachers.

Association Panel on Research and Teacher Education (2005)—reaches some tough and generally honest conclusions about the scant evidence supporting the value of formal teacher education. In short, they concede that

there is presently very little empirical evidence to support the methods used to prepare the nation's teachers.

This conclusion is shocking, coming as it does from a group of insiders. It's even more shocking, however, because these teacher educators are, in effect, agreeing with critics who have long asserted that the teacher education field is shooting blanks. But the

authors make clear that this effort is not intended as another volley in the debate over whether teacher education matters. Instead, their purpose is to decipher which research questions the field needs to address, and then to describe how to do so. In short, the study seeks to provide a blueprint for future research.

Still, that AERA orchestrated such an effort is an encouraging sign of growth from a profession long resistant to external criticism. But with this publication, the field appears to argue that if it cannot escape the harsh, dispassionate eye of science, it might as well lay the ground rules for how science should be uniquely applied to education.

Both critics and friends of teacher education will undoubtedly exploit this effort to fuel their century-old debate, but there is something far more revealing about this volume that should not be overlooked. It is the issue that the panel ignores: namely the field's responsibility to prepare teachers to confront the achievement gap, considered the foremost education challenge of our times.

While some might try to explain away the panel's staggering omission of the achievement gap as an academic oversight, the evidence says otherwise. The profession's abdication of its responsibility is startling.

A Dearth of Quality Research

With a couple of exceptions, the 14-member panel consists of well known teacher educators, led by the volume's co-editors, Marilyn Cochran-Smith of Boston College and Kenneth M. Zeichner at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The nearly 800 page volume follows a set pattern. Each chapter, many penned by panel members, examines a particular aspect of teacher preparation (student teaching, professional and subject area coursework, diversity preparation, entry criteria, licensing tests, NCATE accreditation, etc.). Studies relevant to that topic are reviewed for both their rigor and their findings. Any problems with the studies (methodological or otherwise) are identified and a research agenda is advanced to fill the void. The panel was loath to exclude any recent studies, a priori, from consideration. In fact, it elected to set the bar so low that the only evidence not ruled out was anecdotal.

Thus, weak studies get plenty of ink throughout the volume, conferring a degree of legitimacy on many that deserve none. Although panel members mostly conclude (correctly) that these studies are of unacceptable quality, it's never clear why they didn't put down their collective foot from the start and omit them from consideration. For example, Professor Jennifer E. Obidah's study of her own multicultural education course, one of the many self-studies that are mentioned throughout the volume. Obidah relies on old notes and e-mail conversations with her students to measure her success in "helping students reconceptualize their identities in relation to multiculturalism and creating an atmosphere of empowerment in the class."

Even if it hadn't been a self-study based on a tainted data-collection method, the overarching goal of Obidah's work, and the reason for its conduct, would remain unclear.

That the panel included so many education professors' "self-studies" of their own students says something about what makes this field tick. Far too many education school professors are uninterested, the panel laments, in preparing teachers who will be effective in the classroom. For example, the panel could find no professor-authored self-studies that gauged whether ed schools' special education coursework produced students who worked more effectively with special ed children. At best, there was a handful of studies that surveyed teacher candidates about the preparation they had received before entering the classroom. Among that handful, most respondents indicated that their teacher training had been relatively useless.

Some panel members were tough on the quality of research they reviewed. Renee Cliff and Patricia Brady explicitly faulted teacher educators for their detachment from the PK-12 classroom and their lack of interest in asking more useful research questions. So instead of studies that evaluate which ed courses improved students' teaching methods, we get studies such as an education professor's asking his teacher candidates to rate how fun the activities were in his science methods course. He was surprised to learn that the candidates didn't use the activities rated "most fun" when they did their student teaching—unless (interestingly) the activity revolved around food.

Cliff and Brady found that most research evaluated by the panel is primarily concerned with how new teachers are "socialized in the profession and how beliefs and actions change or resist change." It's hard not to be amused when one reads the frustration many education professors express over their students' resistance to pedagogical

theories, especially evident when those students begin their student teaching. With considerable irony, Cliff and Brady describe how these same education professors also found themselves struggling to adhere to their own principles of instruction when confronted with a classroom of real, live children.

Only in a few areas did panel members seem inclined to overlook the inferior nature of the research being reviewed. Suzanne Wilson and Peter Young, for example, write that with “regard to the literature on certification, the trend is toward favoring certified teachers....” This finding receives a fair bit of prominence in the Executive Summary and will undoubtedly turn up from time to time in future defenses of certification. Wilson and Young are correct that all but one of the eight certification studies they reviewed yielded results that favored certification. And to their credit, they acknowledge most of these eight studies suffer from serious methodological problems—particularly Ildiko Laczko-Kerr’s and David C. Berliner’s 2000 study that failed to control for prior student achievement. But for reasons that are never explained (and which violate the rules set forth by the panel in its introduction), Wilson and Young keep that study in the mix, even though its error was egregious. By not discounting the study, Wilson and Young lend unwarranted credibility to the work.

But Wilson and Young prove to be the exception. For the most part, the panel is fair about the quality of work it reviewed. For example, it acknowledged the lack of evidence supporting the belief that education schools accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) are better than those not accredited by NCATE. One wonders whether panel members—most of whom have likely had to endure NCATE’s famously grueling accreditation process—rather enjoyed delivering

this blow. In any case, the dearth of data supporting NCATE is noteworthy, especially considering that the organization has shielded itself from proving its value while manag-

Amazingly, this volumes fails to discuss the foremost education challenge of our times—the achievement gap.

ing to usurp the program approval process from most states. Given the harsh light cast upon other reforms of the teaching profession, such as the National Board and Teach For America, it’s not entirely clear why NCATE has escaped similar close scrutiny.

Challenging Science

Despite the panel’s criticisms of the overall quality of this body of research, it does not share critics’ view that teacher education should adhere to the same proven research standards as other social sciences. The director of the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute for Education Sciences, Grover Whitehurst, is singled out because of his affinity for randomized trials. The panel’s reason for resisting Whitehurst’s agenda, however, is a bit dizzying: “Randomized field trials are generally appropriate at a point in the maturity of the research where enough theoretical and preliminary empirical work has been completed to permit the design of competing interventions that reflect the most promising combinations of components and conditions known to have an impact on the outcomes in question.” There’s a certain “dog-ate-my-homework” defense at work here. Education researchers claim that their field is still theoretically young, that it has been too poorly funded, that it’s too complex to give meaning to most empirical research. In short, education is an elusive science, unlike any other.

The panel also takes exception to the rather substantial body of research often cited by the field's critics. Much of that research (such as the Mathematica study of Teach For America) has shown, at best, a relatively even trade-off between hiring teachers who have been formally prepared and hiring teachers with strong academic backgrounds. Interloper economists did most of this research—not teacher educators themselves—and are openly disdainful of the quality of research coming out of the field. The panel denigrates the research of these economists for using a sole outcome as a measure of a teacher's effectiveness: student achievement, summarily dismissed here as “reductionist studies of single factors.”

Distrust of student test scores as a measure of a teacher's effectiveness permeates the volume. This is not surprising given the contempt in which many teacher educators hold standardized tests. They have an ambitious strategy to move the testing monkey off their backs. The panel is most concerned with redefining what test scores actually represent. Test scores, they say, should not be viewed as a relatively reliable and important measure of how well children read or do math. As the panel suggests: “Whether SAT and ACT tests actually measure intellectual aptitude or achievement, highly correlated with SES, remains debatable.” The value of test scores is redefined in the most narrow terms, faulted for failing to measure other important functions of schooling, teacher quality, and student well-being.

“The emphasis on test scores is understandable,” writes the panel, “but it limits our knowledge about the impact of the [teacher] quality profile on other cognitive performance measures and student outcomes such as attitudes, self-concept, motivation, cultural identity, graduation, college entry, and avoidance of risky behavior.” The only way the panel can substantiate this view is to impugn standardized

tests. In so doing, however, it sweeps two facts under the carpet: 1) The reliable correlation of test scores to those very measures that the panel deems equally important, and 2) The powerful predictive value of such tests. High school graduation, college entry, and avoidance of risky behavior all correlate reliably with standardized

The value of test scores is redefined in the most narrow terms, faulted for failing to measure other important functions of schooling, teacher quality, and student well-being.

test scores from elementary grades on up. Test scores also correlate with school performance, the ability to get a good job, the ability to be motivated and productive on a job, and future wages and earnings. This obfuscation of the facts may play well to certain audiences, but from an empirical standpoint it falls flat.

Where's the Gap?

The most troubling feature of this effort is the research questions the panel didn't ask. We are left to presume that panelists didn't feel such questions were relevant to the preparation of teachers. While the teacher education community has certainly embraced the classroom's *cultural* challenges posed by poverty and race, it seems to have absolved itself of responsibility for preparing teachers to take on the *pedagogical* and *learning* challenges posed by poverty and race. The achievement gap, unquestionably the primary education problem of the 21st century, is mentioned by name only once in the volume, and then only to assert a baseless theory that the gap may be caused (partially) by too many White teachers in the classroom.

What nobler purpose could there be for teacher preparation than to arm U.S. teachers to combat the deleterious effects that poverty and race have on student achievement? Instead, the field has carved out for itself a narrow, even marginal role. It is dismissive of imparting to teacher candidates any sort of practical knowledge and skill. The role of the teacher preparation program in addressing the problem of African American children underperforming in the classroom, if we are to accept the premise offered here, is limited to “prejudice reduction” and “racial identity development” of teacher candidates. Of course, as in other areas of teacher preparation, we discover that few programs actually succeed in developing teachers’ racial identities. And, even in the few instances where they appeared to have done so, there was no effort to follow whether or not these teachers took those lessons into the classroom, or whether or not these lessons made them better teachers.

Throughout this long report, there’s no mention that some pedagogies and curricula have been proven far more effective than others. Instead, teacher candidates are encouraged to arrive at their own solutions by developing their own “equity pedagogy.” This appears to mean that the teacher candidate is supposed to come up with his/her own “methods and materials that support the academic achievement of students from diverse and minority groups, including creating curriculum and instruction based on students’ backgrounds, fostering self-determination and attending to oppressed and underserved groups.” And if the novice gets it wrong?

The disproportionate number of minority children enrolled in special education is treated gingerly, referred to with such circumspection that the authors stumble over their own jargon: “Disability typically is presented as a

parallel marker of diversity in a series of many different diversities.” The primary challenge for the professor is to “teach candidates that every student with a disability also has socio-cultural characteristics that teachers must consider carefully.” What happens after the teacher recognizes that the struggling child

Teacher candidates are encouraged to arrive at their own solutions by developing their own “equity pedagogy.”

sitting before her is black and poor? The same can be said for the few references to English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher preparation. Teacher candidates are taught to appreciate the diversity of the non-English speaking child, with preparation programs bearing no responsibility for imparting strategies for helping them learn the language.

What Wasn’t Asked

Perhaps the most remarkable question that was not asked by the panel is whether programs effectively teach reading instruction to teacher candidates. The panel only addresses early reading within the broad context of English and language arts courses. When it comes to preparing candidates to teach high-poverty, high-minority, and special-education populations, reading instruction is completely missing. The extensive and robust science behind reading instruction neatly packaged by the National Reading Panel is ignored. This omission is breathtaking.

Teacher education doesn’t just do an inadequate job of training teacher candidates to be effective instructors; we are also told that that is not its responsibility. That would not be news to beleaguered urban school principals who know all too well that it’s up to schools to train new teachers to teach reading, man-

age the classroom, and impart how best to teach children who are English language learners or assigned to special education.

In this vein, it's worth noting that methods coursework—those once practical inventions—apparently are no longer about preparing teachers, for example, to teach math in the primary grades. That understanding of methods coursework is now passé, transformed by teacher educators into a new genre about working with teacher candidates' beliefs, teaching practices, and “the creation of identities.” The field has turned its back on the pressing need to impart practical knowledge and skills to teachers, and it

disparages those who still insist on using this outmoded term of “training” teachers despite the fact that the medical profession has no problem “training” doctors.

In ignoring the role that teacher education could play in giving teachers the necessary skills to alleviate the ill-effects of poverty, the profession misses its best chance to counter its many critics. Had the panel asserted that teacher education should be the front line in the nation's war against the achievement gap, it could have made a sound case for justifying the existence of the profession. Instead, it passes on this mandate to help right educational inequities, and thus consigns itself to irrelevance.

About the Author:

Kate Walsh (kwalsh@nctq.org) is president of the National Council on Teacher Quality.

Fwd: is an occasional series of essays, short studies, and articles of interest on K-12 education reform, sent to you by the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. Want to know more about us? Surf to www.edexcellence.net and sign up for *The Education Gadfly*, our weekly email brief. You can also talk back to us at backtalk@edexcellence.net.

The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and Thomas B. Fordham Institute are nonprofit organizations that conduct research, issue publications, and engage in action projects in elementary/secondary education reform nationally and in Dayton, Ohio. Neither is connected with or sponsored by Fordham University. The opinions expressed in *Fwd:* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation or Institute, their staff, trustees, or supporters.



1701 K Street, NW
Suite 1000
Washington, D.C. 20006
tel 202 223-5452
fax 202 223-9226
www.edexcellence.net