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The Preparation of Teachers: An Unstudied Problem in Education

A Review
by
June T. Fox

The decade of the 1950s and the early 1960s was a time of national ferment with regard to the quality of American elementary and secondary education. Complaint against the educational enterprise began but a few years after the national attention on World War II ended, and was dramatically escalated with the success in 1957 of Russia's space efforts in exceeding ours, which most Americans had never foreseen as even a remote possibility. Some of the best minds of the scholarly community turned their attention not only to criticism of American education, but to changing its nature and quality. In this task, they received the support of the federal government, foundations, the media, the public, both informed and uninformed, and finally, after a period of resistance, of the professional community of educators, both teacher-training faculty as well as teachers and school administrators.

“This period of ferment can be characterized as one of debate between emphasis on the process versus the product of education . . . ”

Perhaps this period of ferment can be characterized as one of debate between emphasis on the process versus the product of education--a debate which was going on even before the advent of John Dewey. The schools and schooling which were the object of criticism in the 50s and 60s, at least as public perception would have it, were focused on process alone, and not concerned with the product. The product which the scholars were concerned with was intellectual mastery by students of carefully defined principles plus the bodies of facts which surround them, which characterizes an intellectual discipline.

The little book, The Process of Education,¹ a report written by Jerome Bruner and published in 1959, was the manifesto of the scholars, but in some way its title was a misnomer. Bruner paid considerable attention to different modes of learning as a way for teachers to lead their students to mastery of the subject matter,

and to different cognitive styles related to children's development. However, the concern was mastery of the disciplines, and the process it described--one of discovery learning--was a means to the end of such mastery.

This curriculum movement paid too little heed to the teachers who had, ultimately, to be responsible for teaching children to master the disciplines beyond its recognition that teaching must be done well. The question of how teacher education (most particularly on a pre-service level) should proceed so that teachers could be prepared to conduct discovery learning was not posed.

In response to this unasked question, The Preparation of Teachers, a perceptive and sensitive book written by Seymour Sarason and Kenneth Davidson, both psychologists who had done much research in schools, and Burton Blatt, a distinguished special educator, was published in 1962.²

In the first chapter of their book, the authors ask, "What is the relevance of the contents and procedures of teacher training for the functions which a teacher performs in her or his day by day work?" . . . If one described the activities in which a teacher engages and the problems she encounters, to what extent would one find that her teacher-training experiences constitute a relevant and adequate preparation?"⁵ The widespread notion that a teacher's mastery of content, even the content of the new curricula of the 1960s, translates into effective teaching which results in mastery of that same content by children is mistaken, according to the authors. They note that effective teachers must perform a host of functions: talking with parents, supervising behavior, arousing curiosity and interest in the world of ideas, generating creativity, fostering alternative learning styles, encouraging questioning--in short, serving as "observers, evaluators and influencers of the behavior and learning of children in the classroom"⁴ within the context of the school culture. Teacher training, in 1962, did not prepare teachers to perform these functions.

In attempting to provide insights and possible solutions for addressing this major deficiency in teacher preparation, the authors presented a careful analysis, based on their observation, of the events in a "classroom day" in three second grade classrooms, from the time the children arrive in the morning until the teachers complete the work of the day, about 4 p.m. In all classrooms, "there are tense, fidgety children, dreamers and some who pass away the class hours waiting for recesses, free play after lunch and gym classes so they can engage in athletics. Excitable or aggressive

children, by virtue of their hyperactivity seem omnipresent, but peaceful or very quiet and shy ones can be overlooked so easily. Some are highly motivated academically whereas some do not seem motivated at all. There are children who learn and adapt without effort but for others these processes seem torturously long and difficult. Some request help endlessly, sometimes with no apparent need, while others almost never seek assistance although they find learning a great trial."⁵ To deal with the complex personalities and behavior of 30 children, teachers must attend to the "covert" as well as the overt processes of learning. Learning must be structured so that all children can "absorb and utilize knowledge and skills in an increasingly independent, curiosity satisfying, productive attack on the world of ideas and problems."⁶ To achieve this goal, teachers must become sophisticated observers, they must be skillful in moving from observation to action and they must bridge the gap from theory to practice.⁷ Of three teachers whom the authors observed, only one seemed to successfully manifest these abilities, in spite of the fact that all were experienced teachers. Since teachers' classroom behavior reflects their own training, the authors conclude that most teachers have been ill-prepared for their roles as "observers and tacticians." And it is to this inadequacy in training that they address their major attention in The Preparation of Teachers.

The book describes a three year observational study of teacher training which involved a novel observational seminar which they devised, conducted with 15 college juniors none of whom had previously taken education courses or had spent time in a classroom. The students were transported into a special education class (though it could have been any elementary class, the authors assert) once a week for nine weeks to observe the 12-15 children being taught by a truly masterful teacher. The college students observed through a one-way mirror for a period of time and then convened in a seminar conducted by Seymour Sarason and Burton Blatt. The students' charge was to react to what they observed and respond and react in the seminar discussion, each in her or his own way. The instructors in the seminar took great pains to help the students understand that they do not "see" objectively, but all are predisposed to response patterns shaped by their own life experience, related to how they have been taught previously. Each observer reacts to certain stimuli, focusing on particular events or children which particularly caught their attention. Learning to overcome this predisposition to "see" certain things and relegate others to the background was a significant factor in observation.

Following the seminar, the students did their nine-week elementary practice teaching, after which the seminar reconvened. Events and actions which confronted them in their practice teaching and impeded their success had seemed not to represent a problem to the particularly masterful teacher of the observational class. Reexamination of her teaching made it more obvious that she, too, encountered these problem situations, but now the college students were sensitive to the ways in which she dealt with them successfully.

Many of the students reacted to their student teaching experience with criticism. The major critique seemed to be that "supervision, in the sense that the student's actual teaching behavior and handling of pupils was searchingly reviewed in terms of psychological principles, the degree to which individual differences were taken account of, and the nature of the learning process, was rare. It was as if the student teacher were viewed as a kind of mechanic who had to be taught the technical know how."⁸ This criticism extended both to the students' master teachers as well as their college supervisors.

In two subsequent years, Sarason and Blatt continued the observation seminar, with the experience for the students essentially similar to the results of the first year. The reaction to the value of the observational seminar led the authors of the book to propose a new approach to teacher training--one based on a very different notion of supervision than the one which prevailed then (and now) in teacher training. A large amount of supervision time in an observational seminar is proposed; students are to be "forced" to give expression about events which puzzled or troubled them, encouraged to separate description from prediction and led to learn to utilize their own resources to develop solutions. Observational experiences of a more focused nature should be incorporated into psychology courses. And, perhaps the seminar could be adapted also to illustrating the utilization of methods for the teaching of content such as reading or math.

The success of this approach to teacher training is, obviously, dependent upon the quality of the leaders of the observational seminar. The seminar leader must understand and have had experience with a wide variety of children, and understand the social psychology of the school, the problems of teachers and teaching, of translating psychological principles into action and how to guide the seminar students into discovering for themselves the nature of skillful observation. (Sarason et al., expressed hope that practitioners of clinical, social and child psychology would break down the barriers between academic and educational psychology and move into the classroom to assist in the training of teachers to serve as "psychological observer, diagnostician and tactician.") The master teachers, likewise, must be selected to incorporate similar qualities and skills in clinical supervision, as well as being expert in guiding and stimulating children's learning.

In responding to The Preparation of Teachers, it is possible to raise a number of serious questions about its thesis. The authors proposed that their clinical observation focus, which seemed to elicit such a positive response from the neophyte teachers they worked with, be a subject of extensive research and study but, in fact, this has not been the case. There is, thus, no "hard" evidence that if it were put into effect on a widespread basis it would indeed successfully transform teacher education to make teachers master of the processes they describe and value. They suggest that clinical supervisors, who replicate the skill in that role of Sarason and Blatt, might be found from the ranks of the field of academic psychology, and that the barriers between academic and educational psychology would be broken down. In fact, this has not occurred. One can question whether nine sessions in observation are enough to make a difference in effective teaching and perhaps the observation must continue for a much longer period of time. But their emphasis on training teachers to become masters of the process through which effective learning can occur is supremely significant, and an important contribution to the literature on teacher training.

Unhappily, the historical circumstances of the Vietnam War and the social and political upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s eclipsed the national concern for educational mastery of quality "products" and, with it, for the kind of process the book emphasized to produce mastery. Teacher training remained basically unchanged and the problems and solutions which The Preparation of Teachers discussed unattended to.

Now, in the 1980s, ferment about schools has begun once again. This time, once again, the public criticism has mounted against the failure of schools--poor

achievement of students as measured in standardized tests, scientific illiteracy, dropout rates of staggering proportions, unrest in urban schools; one is immersed in a sense of "deja vu." Reports by commissions staffed by public figures--governors, educators, businessmen, union leaders--have studied and reported about the deficiencies and made recommendations to rectify them. (This time, the scholars have not taken the lead in the criticism.) In some of the reports, attention is being paid to the preparation of teachers in a way which did not occur during the curriculum revolution of a quarter of a century ago. This is particularly the case in the Carnegie Task Force and the Holmes Group reports, which focus on teacher preparation.

The major suggestions which these reports make are to raise standards for entrance to teacher training, insist on a liberal arts major for all teachers, improve teacher salaries, recognize superior teachers, establish career ladders for teachers (categorizing them as entry level, professional and "master" teachers), eliminate undergraduate majors in education and extend teacher training a fifth or sixth year to include work in pedagogy and internship in "clinical schools" under the direction of identified "master" teachers.

The purpose of "better" teachers is to assure that students who emerge from the schools are able to reverse the direction of falling achievement. And, in most cases, this "achievement," this product of the improved teaching process, is to be measured in standard achievement test results, i.e., higher levels of basic skill-mastery. Thus, critique of 1980s schooling once again focuses on product, although the "product" is differently defined than that of high level abstraction which characterized the desired "product" of the 1960s.

In 1986, Sarason and Davidson published a second edition of The Preparation of Teachers. In a moving preface to the new edition, Sarason states what had been pointed to in the first edition, namely that even higher quality, liberally educated, more appreciated and better paid teachers are not being prepared for the realities of the classroom, the school, the school system. Once again and still they are not being prepared for the practical problem of how to implement and promote learning in a class of 20-30 students who vary markedly in motivation, achievement, background, personality and the degree to which they are "at risk." The preface suggests that there be some augmentation and modification in the length and focus of the field experiences, such as the observation and seminar described in the first edition. But again, as previously, the focus is on "wedding theory with observation, theory with practice." If this is not done, all the other improvements will fall short of success, or outrightly fail much as did the movement to implement sophisticated curricula twenty-five years ago.

The second edition of the book is dedicated to the memory of Burton Blatt, one of the three authors, who died in 1985. The most significant honor which could be paid to his memory would be for the message of The Preparation of Teachers to be heeded. Better products of the schools--students who can learn effectively and contribute to society--depends on better processes of teaching them. The Preparation of Teachers provides insights and wisdom into ways to ensure that end. One would hope that its message would not once again be overlooked.

Footnotes

¹Jerome Bruner, The Process of Education (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961).

²Seymour Sarason, Kenneth Davidson and Burton Blatt, The Preparation of Teachers (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1962).

³Seymour Sarason, Kenneth Davidson and Burton Blatt, The Preparation of Teachers (Cambridge, MA: Brookline Books, Inc., 1986), p. 2.

⁴Ibid, p. 16.

⁵Ibid, p. 52.

⁶Ibid, p. 73.

⁷Ibid, p. 73.

⁸Ibid, p. 88.

