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COMMENTARY

Teacher Ed. Reform: Good Intentions Gone Wrong

By William A. Proefriedt

The latest effort to reform teacher education strikes me as a tale of good intentions gone badly wrong. We repeat in miniature the approach the school reformers take on a larger canvas. Like them, we have, with the best of intentions, seized on ideas that show great promise, carried them beyond reasonable limits, and ignored the complexity of the issues with which we are engaged.

Here is the alluring if oversimplified logic behind the latest approach to the reform of teacher education: The purpose of undergraduate and graduate programs for teachers is to prepare them to successfully educate young people in K-12 classrooms. Since we already measure the achievement of K-12 students through a variety of standardized tests, it seems sensible to evaluate the quality of a teacher education program by the criterion of how well the students of its graduates, all other things being equal, do on these standard measures of academic achievement. The teacher education programs that have the most positive impact on teacher effectiveness will then serve as models to be emulated by others.

Until recently, the task of making connections between the academic achievement of K-12 students and the preparation of their teachers has been too tangled a project to tackle. Outcomes-based teacher-educators and state education department officials settled for determining a number of teacher behaviors that seemed to enhance student learning. They then required teacher-candidates to demonstrate competency in these in order to acquire certification. Demonstrating such competencies seemed superior as a predictor of teacher effectiveness to completing a set of courses or a degree.

Given the new sense of urgency about narrowing achievement gaps, and supported by new technologies and more statistical sophistication, state education departments, the U.S. Department of Education, and various universities will soon be tracking the connection between teacher education programs and the test scores of K-12 students. One teacher education institution has already placed a full-page ad on the inside cover of a leading research journal claiming that the students of graduates of its reading and literacy program "had gains in reading fluency that were on average 4.8 words per minute, or 14 percent greater than students" of teachers who had received master's degrees from other programs.

In a major speech on teacher preparation, given at Teachers College, Columbia University, this past October, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan **urged teacher-educators** to "make better outcomes for students the overarching mission that propels all their efforts." He called on states and districts to put in place longitudinal-data systems allowing them to track student performance and growth on subject-matter tests to the teacher education programs that prepared the students' teachers.

When Secretary Duncan tells his audience that "to keep America competitive, and to make the American dream of equal educational opportunity a reality, we need to recruit, reward, train, learn from, and honor a new generation of talented teachers," he reminds us of the ways in which American teachers, and teacher-educators, have always seen their work as a missionary endeavor. He is Catharine Beecher encouraging her teachers to found schools in the newly opened Western territories; he is W.E.B. Du Bois praising the women of New England who taught the children of the freedmen during Reconstruction; he is Jane Addams, inspiring the social workers in America's cities to respond to the wave of European immigrants in the early part of the last century.

Again today, the schools, overreaching themselves, claim primary responsibility for the nation's achieving equality of opportunity at home and economic competitiveness on the world stage. And we teacher-educators see ourselves as responsible for the success of the schools in their dual mission. Further, we now assert the ability to trace the link between the educational achievement of students and the quality of the teacher education institutions in which their teachers were trained.

Holding teacher education programs responsible for the quality of the teachers they graduate seems reasonable. Measuring the quality of teachers primarily by the educational achievement of their students is appealing. If we have the statistical sophistication to trace student scores on achievement tests to the programs preparing our teachers, why not do so? Won't such transparency set off a healthy competition to turn out teachers able to enhance the measured educational achievement of their charges?

When teacher-educators enlist in this latest educational crusade, their intentions are noble, but they are blind to the complexity of the task. It lies not just in the difficulty of teasing out teacher effects on measured student achievement, or in connecting current teacher practice to past teacher education programs. The more serious problem concerns our definition of student achievement. At some level we and Secretary Duncan both know that the tests do not quite capture it.

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"We have taken promising ideas, oversimplified them, and proclaimed that we are on the road to better teacher education programs."

In another place in his Teachers College speech, Duncan says: "A great teacher can literally change the course of a student's life. They light a lifelong curiosity, a desire to participate in democracy, and instill a thirst for knowledge." He ends his talk with Henry Adams' encomium to teachers: "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." These are more than empty phrases designed to please an audience. They reveal Duncan's understanding that the real work of teachers involves more than producing in their charges adequate scores on standardized tests.

To make real our good intentions, we leap at oversimplifications. We unwisely accept test scores as a facsimile of student learning. In doing so, we talk ourselves into believing we are holding our schools, and now our teacher education institutions, accountable. Accountability of institutions is necessary in a democratic society. We have good intentions—but we act with willful blindness. For we surely know, with John Dewey, and with Arne Duncan in his better moments, that student learning, achievement, and intelligence involve, among a host of other things, the growing capacity to make meaning out of new experiences, a capacity that the testers, to their credit, make no claim to measure. We know that test scores do not get at the curiosity, the thirst for knowledge, and the commitment to democracy of which Duncan speaks, but, recklessly, we *act* as if they do.

Tests quite often have significant value, and a rich variety of pedagogical uses. Finally, though, students' test scores represent their performance on a single occasion, on a small sample of test items, most likely in a paper-and-pencil format, relating to an equally small sample of learning objectives in the content area tested. We go beyond all reasonable limits when we take the test scores as a proxy of student achievement or as a measure of the quality of the programs from which teachers graduated. We have been bewitched by the real promise of quantifying certain abilities, by our understandable desire to hold our institutions accountable, and by the significance we attach to our calling. We have taken promising ideas, oversimplified them, and proclaimed that we are on the road to better teacher education programs, better schools, more educational opportunity, making America competitive, and to pie in the sky by and by.

William A. Proefriedt is a professor emeritus in the school of education at Queens College, and continues to work as a mentor in the City University of New York's Faculty Fellowship Publication Program. He is the author, most recently, of High Expectations: The Cultural Roots of Standards Reform in American Education (Teachers College Press, 2008), and can be reached at billpro21@verizon.net.

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