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Improving Teacher Quality in Oklahoma: A Closer Look

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Are teacher training and teacher quality in Oklahoma really improving? The answer depends on whom you ask – education's providers or education's consumers. Under the guise of vaguely stated pedagogical reforms, Oklahoma is promoting the adoption of an approach to teaching that is at odds with the educational aims of Oklahoma's parents and taxpayers. In effect, new teachers are being taught beliefs, methods and attitudes which will undermine Oklahoma's efforts to improve student achievement.

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Is Oklahoma's Effort to Improve Teacher Quality Paying Off?

Recent studies confirm that teacher effectiveness is key to learning.[1] Oklahoma has been working to reform teacher training since the early 1980s.[2] A number of broader educational reforms were phased in during the 1990s. Are results beginning to show? It depends on which reports you read. Some claim success, but others take a more sober stance.

In his February 7, 2000, State of the State Address, Governor Keating talked at length about needed improvements in education.[3] When he said, "We must say 'no' to having to remediate 38 percent of our children who go from high school to college," he was talking about recent high school graduates having to take courses in reading, writing, and arithmetic when they start college. Clearly, his report indicated that much remains to be accomplished.

The governor called for an end to social promotion in schools and to remedial courses in four-year colleges. He went on to say that Oklahoma "must dramatically raise the bar in education. … We are too talented to accept these statistics."

Oklahoma's education producers have one perspective on public education. Education consumers have another. The volume of reports reflecting the producers' focus seems to have resulted in an image of progress that is far more impressive than the actual results.

Contrast Governor Keating's assessment of Oklahoma's public schooling to the upbeat reports on school and teacher quality that have appeared in the media over the last 10 years. They paint a picture of progress across the board: Class size reduction, increased teacher salaries, greater shared decision-making in schools, increased teacher morale, improved parent, business, and community involvement, strengthened academic standards, and funding for everything from building repairs to the addition of librarians, counselors, kindergarten programs, improved student testing, and enhanced teacher training.

Painting a Rosy Picture

Following are some examples of this positive spin on Oklahoma's educational system. In 1990, Barbara Smith, then president of the Oklahoma Education Association, said, "We can expect that over a period of time, our achievement test scores will improve, and fewer of our college freshmen will be taking remedial classes.[4] … HB 1017 outlines what we really want students to know and be able to do. … And they aren't going to move from grade to grade, or graduate, unless they demonstrate the necessary abilities."[5]

A 1991 report sounded even more optimistic: "A survey of superintendents in 25 school districts showed all reported 'accomplishing great things this year' because of House Bill 1017, an official of the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma said. … Kathryn Hinkle, state president of the league, said the bill 'has dramatically changed Oklahoma's public education system.'"[6]

Jump ahead to 2000. *Education Week*'s "Quality Counts 2000"offered a similarly enthusiastic report: "Oklahoma's grade for standards and accountability jumped from a C- to an A- this year, the most significant improvement of any state."[7]

"Quality Counts 2000" also reported that in the last decade Oklahoma's class sizes have dropped from 35 or 40 to 15 — a figure below the national average — and teacher salaries have risen to a cost-of-living adjusted value of $35,159, which is a figure in the middle fifth of cost-of-living adjusted salaries.[8] In addition, it found that Oklahoma spends $41.04 per $1,000 on education — a level of spending effort in the middle third of national range.[9]

Teacher quality is the area in which some of the most far-reaching reforms have taken place. Chief among them has been the creation of an Oklahoma Commission for Teacher Preparation (OCTP). OCPT is now responsible for setting all teacher training and licensure standards. Only six months prior to Governor Keating's address, Dr. Barbara Ware, the chairman of the Oklahoma Commission for Teacher Preparation, wrote:

> In many ways Oklahoma is ahead of the nation. For example, *Education Weekly's* (sic) January 1997 "Quality Counts" report rated Oklahoma the only "A" in the nation in quality of teacher preparation. This high mark is a result of many years of work that began in 1990 with a taskforce recommendation to study teacher preparation.[10]

According to a report in *The Daily Oklahoman*, Dr. Ware and her colleagues have been national trendsetters: "Since the commission was formed, Oklahoma has received top grades from several organizations for how it prepares its teachers, includ-

ing being named the top teacher preparation program in the country by *Education Week* last year."[11] Kyle Dahlem, former president of the Oklahoma Education Association, agrees that OCTP has had an impact: "There's no question that they've changed how teachers teach in the classroom."[12]

Two Conflicting Messages

Oklahoma's current ACT scores[13] dropped a bit from previous years and its rating in "Quality Counts 2001" was not quite as strong. But, plainly, the public is still getting two different messages about education: A positive one that is focused on what the education community counts as indicators of improvement and a less-favorable one that is focused on results.

Is this merely a disagreement between optimists and pessimists? No. These contrasting reports represent two different perspectives on public education: That of education's providers and that of its consumers.[14] Education's providers are the teachers, administrators, and others who are employed or trained as educators. To them, legislative enactments, expanded funding, new policies, new programs, and other efforts that make a difference in the classroom are the bottom line. They reflect a sincere commitment to improvement.

Education's consumers, by contrast, are the parents, employers, and taxpayers who rely on public schools and who foot the bill. To them, promising developments are fine, but they want more. Their bottom line is student achievement.

Is 'Progress' Actually Progress?

Both providers and consumers have legitimate perspectives on school reform, but in Oklahoma the sheer volume of reports from the education community has created an image of progress that is far more impressive than the actual results. For example, according to *Education Week's* "Quality Counts 2000," Oklahoma ranks 12th among the 50 states in fourth-grade reading in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). However, such a comparison means much less than meets the eye, because the other states are performing poorly. In truth, only 30 percent of Oklahoma's fourth-graders are "proficient" readers. Worse, 34 percent read at the "below basic" level, meaning their reading skills are seriously deficient.[15]

A more realistic assessment of Oklahoma's standing is the percentage of students who have reached the level of "proficient" or above — the criterion by which "Quality Counts" ranks the states. By that indicator, 70 percent of Oklahoma's students lack acceptable competency.[16] By comparison, 54 percent of top-ranked Connecticut's students are below proficient — better, but still much in need of improvement. Perhaps more significantly, Oklahoma is not among those states that have shown significant improvement in fourth-grade reading since 1992 — a troubling result in light of the many reforms that have been undertaken.

Achievement in other subjects similarly shows that Oklahoma compares favorably with other states, yet is deficient with regard to the proficiency standard used by "Quality Counts" and the Southern Regional Education Board.[17] In eighth-grade reading, only 29 percent of Oklahoma's students are proficient. In eighth-grade writing, 25 percent are proficient. NAEP data in the critical areas of math and science are not available for Oklahoma.[18]

Oklahoma is not among those states that have shown significant improvement in 4th grade reading since 1992 – a troubling result in light of the many reforms that have been undertaken.

The results of Oklahoma's own testing indicate above-average results on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for the third and seventh grades.[19] The educational significance of these findings, however, is unclear. As noted by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), such reports fell into disrepute in the late 1980s when it was discovered that *all states* were reporting themselves to be above average on the basis of antiquated norms.[20]

Data reported from Oklahoma's Core Curriculum Tests are colored by similar uncertainties.[21] Figures showing the percentage of schools with 70 percent of students obtaining at least a "satisfactory" score on the various elements of Oklahoma's Core Curriculum test are publicly available, but their significance depends on the meaning of "satisfactory." The Oklahoma Performance Index defines "satisfactory" as the second of four levels of proficiency: "advanced," "satisfactory," "limited knowledge," and "unsatisfactory." Given the percentages of students counted as "satisfactory," it appears that Oklahoma's definition of "satisfactory" includes scores that the NAEP and the SREB would call "basic." In other words, some portion of the students identified as "satisfactory" have achieved less than the minimum standard set by outside agencies.

Oklahoma's ACT scores have risen steadily until this year, when they dropped from 20.8 to 20.5.[22] Even if they had reached the national average of 21.0, the need for remedial coursework would not have been eliminated. Nationally, remedial courses are required for approximately one-third of entering college students as a result of deficiencies in their pre-college education. It is a problem in Oklahoma and all other states.

Again, and in fairness, Oklahoma's levels of educational achievement are not as deficient in comparison to other states as they are disappointingly modest in light of the time, money, and effort that have been expended over the last decade. Assuming that a reasonable long-term objective is to reduce the number of below-proficient students to 30 percent, it will take 13 to 20 years of steady progress at current rates for Oklahoma to reach its goals.[23]

If the present rate of progress requires the kind of budgetary increases that reform has thus far required, the economic cost of educational improvement will be very substantial indeed.

The education community aspires to professional standards like those in engineering and medicine. But engineers whose bridges collapse and doctors who practice quackery lose their licenses – and programs that train them lose their accreditation.

Two Views of Education, Two Sets of Priorities

The difference between the image and the reality of Oklahoma's reforms stems from more than selective attention to facts or overly optimistic spin. It reflects a subtle but important distinction about public education's aims and priorities. Educational improvement is substantially slower and more expensive than need be because the taxpayers who furnish the money and the parents who furnish the children have one set of priorities and educators have another.

The public wants education that, first and foremost, serves the child's *future* interests, i.e., education that equips the child with the knowledge and skills that responsible adults consider necessary for success in the adult world.[24] By contrast, the kind of teaching idealized by the education community — especially the teacher-training community — is concerned first and foremost with whether the classroom experience is well received by the student.[25] Both the education community and the consuming public want what is best for children and both want students to learn well and to enjoy school, but there is an important conceptual difference in their views. The "improvements" that have taken place in Oklahoma — especially the reforms in teacher training — primarily have fit the education community's concept, not the public's.

What the consuming public expects of the schools is expressed with reasonable clarity in law and policy. Specifically, voters elect or permit the appointment of citizen governing bodies to act on their behalf. These groups establish curricula, set course and grade level objectives, write policies regarding report cards and standardized tests, etc. all to ensure — to the extent possible — that students acquire beneficial knowledge and skills. Boards of education define and prescribe a body of beneficial knowledge and skills, and they require children to attend school. Their actions presume that responsible adults have a better idea of what children need to learn than do the children themselves, and that quality schooling and effective teaching are the forms of schooling and teaching that bring about the prescribed results.[26]

Teachers, professors of education, and members of the public education bureaucracy — i.e., public education's providers — are taught to think of schooling in terms of a theoretical ideal.[27] They believe that the knowledge and skills considered important by policymakers and the public are only one part of a broad range of intellectual, social, and emotional considerations with which schools and teachers should concern themselves. They value the knowledge and skills prescribed by the curriculum but do not necessarily consider them a top priority. Rather, they conceive of schooling as a social and cultural intervention that has the potential to disrupt what are considered natural, developmentally governed, learning processes. From the standpoint of this ideal, teaching's highest priority is *not* to ensure that each child has the knowledge and skills prescribed by the curriculum, but to avoid a number of empirically unsubstantiated risks that are believed to arise from overzealous efforts to bring about measured student achievement.[28]

Differing Names for the Same Ideal

A current expression of this theoretical viewpoint is "constructivism." Constructivists object to curricular insistence on specified measurable learning outcomes on the grounds that teaching suited to such outcomes may hinder true "understanding." Instead of seeking measurable gains in achievement, their top priority is to teach in a way that they believe is conducive to the naturalistic emergence of "thinking skills" and knowledge "constructed" by the student.[29]

The problem with this approach is that it may not produce the knowledge and skills expected by education's consumers.

Teaching that places theory-based developmental considerations above measured gains in student achievement is known by names such as "child-centered," "learner-centered," "student centered," and a variety of others.[30] In addition to constructivism, there are current practices such as "developmentally appropriate instruction," "discovery learning," and "brain-based learning," and recognized fads such as "open education," "self-esteem enhancement," and "whole language" reading instruction. Each has unique developmental emphases and curricular concerns.

All of these approaches to teaching are derivatives of what historically has been known as "progressive education" and what today is called "best practice" teaching. "Best practice," as used by educators today, refers to teaching that is consistent with progressive principles, not teaching of proven effectiveness.[31] Most of the well-known educational fads of the twentieth century are mutations of progressivism.[32]

American public education has careened from one educational fad to another. Virtually all of them have been variants of learner-centered thinking and virtually all of them have been implemented by trained and licensed teachers working in state-approved schools.

Rather than instruct, shape, or guide the student, progressive/learner-centered teaching is intended to permit discovery and to facilitate the expression of curiosity and creativity. It is a kind of "edutainment" intended primarily to stimulate and engage. It treats learning as incidental, subordinate, and secondary in importance. The ideal teacher is said to be "a guide on the side," not "a sage on the stage."[33]

Progressive/learner-centered practice not only reorders teaching's priorities, it opposes traditional or "teacher-centered" methods, i.e., teaching that requires students to pay attention, make an effort, and behave themselves. Rather than set expectations for student effort and conduct, it encourages social and economic reforms that are intended to mold homes and families in ways that are conducive to the development of eager and well-prepared students, i.e., the kind of students who respond well to learner-centered instruction.[34] For this reason, learner-centered teacher-training programs strongly emphasize teacher commitment to equity, diversity, and social justice.[35] Implicitly, teacher-educators reason that if their pedagogical methods are correct and students fail to learn, the fault must lie in society, not their theories![36]

The progressive/learner-centered approach favors flexible curricula, narrative report cards, portfolio assessment, and autonomy for both the teacher and the student. It opposes clear educational standards, letter grades, standardized tests, and accountability. It presumes that good schools and good teachers maximize stimulation and opportunities for student enrichment. It conceives of educational improvement as growth in the availability of enriching experiences — the very kind of improvements celebrated in media accounts of Oklahoma's school reforms.

Progressive/learner-centered teaching is not simply an alternative means to the same ends sought by parents and the public. It is an approach to education that places a distinctly lower value on knowing and understanding the accumulated wisdom of past generations.[37] Learning guided by curiosity and passing enthusiasms inevitably produces uncertain outcomes. Students are not required to know particular facts or be able to demonstrate particular skills. Instead of adding "thinking skills" to knowledge, the learner-centered view effectively substitutes thinking skills for knowledge. It prepares students to think but leaves them without the knowledge and skills on which sound thinking is founded.

In effect, progressive/learner-centered schooling attempts to minimize a hypothetical risk to an idealized concept of intellectual development at the expense of increasing the well-known risk of academic failure. By its unyielding adherence to such a perspective, the education community effectively places its theoretically founded concerns about overzealous teaching ahead of the public's concerns about youthful ignorance and incompetence. The education community's corporate stance in this matter may be the greatest single impediment to improved student achievement in the Oklahoma public schools.

Oklahoma's Teacher Training Reforms

Over the past several years, Oklahoma has undertaken a series of reforms intended to improve the quality of Oklahoma's teachers. They are based on recommendations of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF).[38] The NCTAF is a self-appointed group comprised primarily of educators. It is urging states to adopt the teacher training, licensure, and certification standards set by three of the organizations it represents: The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education

(NCATE), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and the newly formed National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS).

Although one of them is newly created, these groups represent the same interests that have governed the teaching profession for the last 50 years. NCATE has been accrediting teacher-training programs since 1954. CCSSO has for many years served as an informal policy-coordinating body among the agencies that approve teacher training and license teachers. A CCSSO task force — the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) — is currently developing model teacher licensure standards. The newly formed NBPTS certifies advanced teacher competencies. The majority of the NBPTS board members are required to be members or officers of the National Education Association or the American Federation of Teachers.

The standards proposed by all three organizations were recently formulated or reformulated for the purpose of improving teacher quality. There is little chance, however, that their new standards will serve the interests of education's consumers any better than the old ones. The reason is that the new standards have the same flaw as the old ones: Blindness to the shortcomings of the progressive/learner-centered concept of education.[39]

The standards applied in both the NCATE states and the non-NCATE states have produced the same perverse result: Untested fads have been adopted and disseminated, and proven but traditional practices have been discouraged.

Public Regulation's Ineffectiveness

Throughout most of its history, American public education has lurched from one educational fad to another.[40] Virtually all of them have been variants of progressive/learner-centered thinking, and virtually all of them have been carried out by trained and licensed teachers working in fully accredited schools. Fads have been permitted to permeate the schools because the educators who set the standards adhere to the same doctrines as the faddists, and their standards have utterly failed to stop any fad that fits the progressive/learner-centered mold.

In the last 50 years, the teacher training, licensure, and certification standards in every state have been written and rewritten repeatedly. In many states, they have been written to comport with NCATE's accreditation standards for teacher training programs. None of them have protected the public. Untested progressive fads have been adopted and time-tested traditional practices have been discouraged. Examples are numerous and well known.

- Prince George's County, Maryland public schools recently spent $150 million to build walls inside of schools that had been constructed to accommodate a 1960s fad called "open education."[41] Teachers insisted on traditional classrooms in order to cut down on intolerable levels of noise and disorder. Open education had been promoted by Maryland's NCATE-approved schools of education and disseminated by its state department of education.
- In response to a precipitous statewide drop in reading scores, the California General Assembly ordered teacher training programs and the California Department of Education to provide training in phonics-based reading instruction — a traditional form of instruction well supported by research.[42] The state-led adoption of the "whole-language" fad in the 1980s is believed to have caused the decline.[43]
- International comparisons have found American students to have some of the lowest math scores but the highest self-ratings of math ability.[44] Many observers believe these unrealistic self-estimates are the product of another 1960s fad: Self-esteem enhancement. Promoted by virtually all colleges of education and state education agencies, the self-esteem movement was based on the erroneous belief that positive self-esteem will lead to academic achievement.[45]
- "Direct Instruction" continues to be ignored by almost all schools of education and state education agencies. Its scripted format is in complete disagreement with the progressive/learner-centered model. Only within the past few years have policymakers begun to learn about Direct Instruction's dramatic successes in the federally funded *Follow Through* project of the sixties and seventies.[46] Schools with high numbers of disadvantaged learners are now finding it especially effective.

The education community aspires to professional standards like those in engineering and medicine; but engineers whose bridges collapse and doctors who employ quackery lose their licenses. Likewise, the programs that train incompetents and quacks lose their accreditation. By contrast, in public education, training, licensure, and accreditation agencies rarely question past fads and failures, much less penalize programs and practitioners. Instead, they promulgate new standards that purport to correct the problems

but, in fact, permit more of the same.

Although little discussed, the inability of the teaching profession's regulatory bodies to protect the public from unsafe and ineffective practice is visible to all. Moreover, change is unlikely. The susceptibilities of the education community's standards are a function of the progressive/learner-centered orthodoxy that captivates the thinking of education's mainstream.[47] The teaching profession's standards will not improve until its doctrines improve.

So long as the reform standards recommended by the NCTAF disagree with the public's educational priorities, the teacher training and licensure reforms set by the Oklahoma Commission for Teacher Preparation are not going to bring about the educational excellence sought by public policy — at least not within the bounds of reasonable time and cost.

Parents and policymakers want schooling that equips children with the knowledge and skills they need for adulthood. They want students to pay attention, make an effort, behave themselves, and generally make good use of their educational opportunities. They want teachers who know how to bring about those outcomes — not ones trained to blame the lack of results on parents and communities.

Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, education is too important to be left to the experts. Schooling practices that permit kids to waste opportunities and wind up with predictable deficiencies are negligent and irresponsible no matter how well intended or grounded in theory.

If Oklahoma's policymakers want to assure that the public's priorities take precedence over those favored by the education community, they must set teacher training and licensure standards that assert them. Key to this result is teaching and teacher training judged, first and foremost, on the basis of their success in producing gains in objectively measured student achievement — a value-added definition of teaching effectiveness.[48] Teacher licensure and advanced certification standards must be geared to the same criterion and performance judged by parties who are independent of the education community.

Without standards that are faithful to the public's aims and without arm's-length assessment of teacher training programs, Oklahoma's teacher training, licensure, and certification standards will continue to encourage misguided idealism in place of effective teaching. ✪

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Endnotes

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[10] Oklahoma Policy Group of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, *The Status of Teaching and Learning in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City, OK: Oklahoma Commission for Teacher Preparation, 1999).

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[14] "Reality Check 2000"—an annual survey conducted by Public Agenda and published by *Education Week* (Vol. 19, number 23, page S1-S8, February 16, 2000)—reported marked differences between the views of consumers of education such as employers and college professors, and those of providers such as school personnel. Professors and employers were highly dissatisfied with the knowledge and skills of high school graduates. Teachers thought public schools were doing a better job than most people think. Other independent surveys of opinion about education have detected the same divide.

[15] Ibid. "Quality Counts 2000: State Grade Tables, Student Achievement"

[16] As defined by the National Assessment Governing Board, educational achievement below the "proficient" level reflects partial mastery at best. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), of which Oklahoma is a member, uses the same standard. According to the SREB, the need to improve the mastery of the two-thirds of students who are below "proficient" is the most serious educational challenge facing the schools of the region (p. 20). Southern Regional Education Board, *Student Achievement in SREB States*, (Atlanta, GA: author, April 2000).
[17] Ibid. SREB (April, 2000).
[18] Ibid. "Quality Counts: 2000, State Grade Tables, Student Achievement"
[19] Ibid. *The Status of Teaching and Learning in Oklahoma*, Appendix B.
[20] Ibid. *Student Achievement in SREB States,* p.5.
[21] Ibid. *The Status of Teaching and Learning in Oklahoma*, Appendix B. Also, "Oklahoma Test Results Packet" available from the Oklahoma State Department of Education http://sde.state.ok.us/acrob/testpack.pdf
[22] Available from Southern Regional Education Board data base: www.sreb.org
[23] According to "Quality Counts 2000," Oklahoma's highest percentage of "proficient" students (30 percent) is in 4th grade reading. Assuming gains of 2 or 3 percent per year—the current rate of improvement on the Oklahoma's Core Curriculum Tests—it will take 13 to 20 years to reach 70 percent.
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[31] The present use of the term "best practice" is based on S. Zemelman, H. Daniels, and A. Hyde, *Best Practice* (Portsmouth, NH: Heineman Publishers, 1998). The authors describe the progressive teaching practices they have gleaned from the standards published by various learned societies. For an engaging description of a school that embodies all that is currently considered "best practice," see D. Frantz and C. Collins, *Celebration USA* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999). *Celebration* is the model community developed by Walt Disney World.
[32] D. Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).
[33] Ibid. *Different Drummers*; Ibid. *Best Practice*.
[34] See T. Jennings, "Developmental Psychology and the Preparation of Teachers Who Affirm Diversity: Strategies Promoting Critical Social Consciousness in Teacher Preparation Programs," *Journal of Teacher Education 46*, no. 4 (1995).
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[36] E. D. Hirsch, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, (New York: Doubleday, 1996). "Within the education community, there is currently no *thinkable* alternative." (italics in the original, p. 69); " . . . the heretical suggestion that the creed itself might be faulty cannot be uttered. To question progressive doctrine would be to put in doubt the identity of the education profession itself." (p. 69)
[37] Ibid. Hirsch, *The Schools We Need*, and Chall, *The Academic Achievement Challenge*.
[38] Ibid. Oklahoma Policy Group of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, *The Status of Teaching and Learning in Oklahoma*.
[39] The following analysis (see p. 10) details the nature and content of the national training, licensure, and certification standards referenced in this essay. See G. Cunningham & D. Crawford, *Will National Standards Improve Teacher Quality in Oklahoma?*
[40] Ibid. Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*.
[41] E. L. Wee, "In Classrooms, Good Walls Make Good Neighbors: Educators Reversing 'Open' Design," *Washington Post*, 25 January 1998.
[42] National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, "Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read " (Washington, DC: 1999). Available at http://www.nationalreadingpanel.org/
[43] Ibid. Good & Brophy, pp. 454-455.
[44] U. S. Department of Education, *Pursuing Excellence: A Study of U. S. 12th Grade Mathematics & Science Achievement in International Context* (Washington, DC, 1998).
[45] M. A. Scheirer & R. E. Kraut, "Increasing Educational Achievement via Self-Concept Change," *Review of Educational Research*, 49(1), (1979).
[46] C. L. Watkins, "Project Follow Through: A Story of the Identification and Neglect of Effective Instruction," *Youth Policy*, (July 1988), 7-11.
[47] For example, Drs. Linda Darling-Hammond and Arthur Wise are the executive directors of NCTAF and NCATE respectively. Both have written approvingly of learner-centered instruction: See L. Darling-Hammond, G. Griffin, and A. Wise, *Excellence in Teacher Education: Helping Teachers Develop Learner-Centered Schools*, ed. R. McClure (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1992). Moreover—as documented by Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde (see above)—several of NCATE's constituent organizations are well-known proponents of the learner-centered view.
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Will National Standards Improve Teacher Quality in Oklahoma?

Across the political spectrum, there is and has been widespread concern about the effectiveness of our public schools. While there is consensus about the need for educational reform, there is little agreement about how best to implement it. This is a particular problem for those who are seeking ways to improve the quality of teachers.

Four national organizations are leading a national effort to have their standards govern the teaching profession. They are the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF), the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), and the National Board of Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS). Oversight bodies comprised primarily of educators govern all four. The National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are heavily represented in these governing bodies. This analysis will demonstrate that the standards developed by these organizations are unlikely to help schools reach the conventional educational goal of improved student achievement.

Most members of the lay public don't realize that educators are taught a different way of thinking about the aims and purposes of education.

Jeanne Chall, late of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has written a brief but authoritative description of the two major viewpoints that are contrasted in this analysis of Oklahoma's teacher quality initiative.[1] Chall uses the terms "student-centered" instruction and "teacher-centered" instruction to refer to the two perspectives. We use the terms "learner-centered," "constructivist," and "progressive" to refer to what she calls the student-centered viewpoint and "teacher-directed," "direct instruction," and "traditional" to refer to what she calls the teacher-centered viewpoint.

Chall's conclusion about the two perspectives is particularly important in light of our finding that Oklahoma's reforms are founded on the learner-centered viewpoint:

> The major conclusion of my study in this book is that a traditional, teacher-centered approach to education generally results in higher academic achievement than a progressive, student-centered approach. This is particularly so among students who are less well prepared for academic learning – poor children and those with learning difficulties at all economic levels.[2]

Parents, employers, policymakers, and most Americans believe that students should master a curriculum comprised of important knowledge and skills. E. D. Hirsch refers to this viewpoint as a belief in the importance of *cultural literacy.*[3] Teachers and schools are generally deemed responsible for assuring that students acquire this knowledge and these skills. Both student and teacher success is gauged by student academic achievement. Most members of the lay public do not know that educators are taught a different way of thinking about the aims and purposes of education. A 1997 Public Agenda survey demonstrates that the teacher education community considers the learner-centered/constructivist viewpoint the most appropriate approach to teaching.[4] Public Agenda termed it the "teacher-as-facilitator" concept. The learner-centered view disdains an emphasis on teaching a traditional set of knowledge and skills as an insufficiently lofty goal for education.

Teacher-educators do not view academic achievement as the primary purpose of our educational system. Instead, they believe that such goals as a love of learning, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving skills, and the promotion of social justice are of equal or greater importance. They frequently respond to poor achievement – especially by economically disadvantaged and minority students – by condemning the tests as unfair and calling for their elimination. They believe that the low achievement of these students reflects the need for increased attention to social and economic conditions rather than changed teaching practices.

From the learner-centered/constructivist standpoint, the teacher is a guide whose role is to permit students a maximum level of autonomy in shaping their own learning. Learner-centered teachers avoid descriptions of teacher actions in the classroom as "teaching," preferring instead to focus on the activities of students. Furthermore, they have little interest in quantifying student achievement using standardized tests.

Increasing Academic Achievement Through Direct Instruction

During the 1960s, under the auspices of the War on Poverty, numerous federally funded education programs were initiated. As funds for such programs became less available, the Office of Education had to initiate procedures for comparing different programs to determine which were most effective and therefore deserved continued funding. These comparative studies were called process-product research. They were predicated on the belief that the effectiveness of an instructional strategy could be most effectively evaluated by measuring achievement outcomes, and they clearly affirmed the value of what is now called direct instruction.[5]

The term "direct instruction" was first used in the planned variation study called *Follow Through*. It was an evaluation of the compensatory education effort sponsored by the U. S. Office of Education specifically intended for students who had completed their eligibility for Head Start. Siegfried Engelmann and associates at the University of Oregon developed a carefully sequenced and comprehensive skills-and-knowledge curriculum, which together with extensive manuals and testing materials came to be known as "Direct Instruction." *Follow Through* found that Direct Instruction produced the greatest academic achievement gains for its students when it was compared to several other competing models.[6]

Since the publication of the *Follow Through* report, the term "Direct Instruction" has been used to refer to the specific program developed at the University of Oregon and the term "direct instruction" (lower case) has been used as a generic descriptor for instructional methods that have been identified by process-product research. The most complete summary of process-product research can be found in Jere Brophy's chapter titled "Teacher behavior and student achievement" in the 1986 edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teaching*. In this chapter, Brophy provides the criteria for identifying a study as an example of process-product research and suitable for inclusion in his review of literature. He included only studies that used achievement test performance as the criterion for successful instruction.

Information about classroom processes was collected using low inference observation forms. This means that the observers collected information on teacher behaviors using a format that minimized the need for interpretations. The intention was to have the observers record only objectively identified behavior.[7] The series of process-product studies conducted by Good and Grouws are good examples of this approach to determining the most effective teacher behaviors.[8] They identified nine 4th grade teachers who consistently maintained their students' achievement test scores in the top third and another nine whose students consistently scored in the bottom third. Observers recorded the teacher's behaviors, which were in turn compared with the results of standardized test performance. Teachers with higher achieving students had better managed classes and spent less time maintaining discipline. These teachers asked more questions, and call-outs by students were not permitted. In general, their presentations were clear and the pace of the class was brisk.

In a study of teacher effectiveness conducted by Brophy and Evertson in Texas, a group of teachers who consistently had their students performing at the same level (across the range of achievement) was evaluated.[9] It was found that those teachers who were businesslike and task oriented were more successful in teaching students than those who were not. These teachers believed they could control what was happening in the classroom and were resourceful in accomplishing this goal. The successful teachers maximized the amount of student exposure to instruction and minimized time spent handling non-instructional activities such as discipline. These teachers monitored the entire class carefully, emphasizing the involvement of all students in academic activities.

In the evaluation studies of the *Follow Through* projects, Stallings and Kaskowitz compared different approaches and found that those with the greatest academic focus were most effective in obtaining higher achievement.[10] The highest correlation with performance was the amount of time devoted to academic tasks. Negative correlations were obtained between academic achievement and time spent in activities such as stories, music, art, and dancing. Traditional activities of teachers such as recitation, questioning, and practice were effective, while less formal, group, and project activities were not.

In general, process-product research using academic achievement as an outcome measure has found that achievement increases when teachers are more explicit in their explanations, direct their lessons toward specific predefined objectives, break lessons into small easily learned steps, give extensive guided practice, frequently ask questions to check for understanding, conduct constant review, and ensure student mastery.[11]

The use of a research model that compares different methods of instruction using achievement tests scores has all but disappeared from educational journals in the past 15 years. The reason may be that there is little to be learned from additional comparisons between direct and indirect instruction. The results are always the same. Over 100 years of research consistently shows that direct and explicit

teaching methods are more effective in increasing academic achievement. In addition, learner-centered methods, even when scrupulously followed, produce few gains and often cause declines in academic performance.[12]

There is a further reason for the diminution in comparative research. Those who find value in direct instruction in education embrace the scientific approach and seek empirical confirmation of their views. In contrast, the learner-centered/constructivist culture has become enamored with the philosophy of postmodernism. Postmodernists reject the authority of science, assert that all opinions are of equal validity and that truth is a matter of opinion. They assert that scientific explanations are merely a form of literary narrative that has no special claim on the truth. Thus postmodernists assert that evidenced-based claims for the superiority of a teaching method should be given no greater weight than anecdotal reports, testimonials, or other more subjective accounts (qualitative research).

Learner-Centered Instruction

The term "learner-centered" is used to describe a style of teaching in which students play a large role in determining what happens in the classroom. "In the ideal student-centered [i.e., learner-centered] school, the teacher remains in the background, the child's learning mainly arising from natural curiosity and desire to learn."[13] If the learning outcomes brought about by such activity are not those contemplated by the curriculum, it is the curriculum and the tests that are questioned, not the teaching methods. This method of instruction is based on the belief that students learn best when freed from teacher-initiated directions and allowed to progress on their own. In the learner-centered classroom, the teacher is expected to act as a facilitator and students are expected to learn from each other. A good teacher is, therefore, "a guide on the side" rather than a director of the learning process, which is derogatorily referred to as "the sage on the stage."

In the learner-centered classroom, there is an emphasis on problem solving and finding multiple ways to answer questions. Hands-on assignments, projects, cooperative learning, and the use of authentic assessment and portfolios also can be anticipated. Advocates of learner-centered instruction believe that students need to construct knowledge and that teachers should capture students' interest with rich and varied assignments. They talk about creating a lifelong community of learners. Of course, all of these activities require students to know, to comprehend, and to be able to learn on their own, i.e., to have at least mastered the basics.

From the earliest grades, this philosophy promotes independent learning, projects, exploration, open-ended problem solving, and integration across disciplines such as math, science, and writing. Often these projects or examinations focus on interesting and controversial subjects "oriented more toward the construction of student *opinion* rather than the reconstruction of disciplinary *knowledge*."[14]

Conversely, there will be little emphasis on content knowledge, basic skills, improved test scores, whole class instruction, drill and practice, cumulative review, curricular objectives, sequences of instruction, specific skills, study or homework. These elements of schooling will be routinely characterized as "traditional," passive, rigid, rote, lockstep, etc.

Teacher-educators do not view academic achievement as the primary purpose of our educational system. Instead, they believe that such goals as creativity, critical thinking, problem solving skills, and the promotion of social justice are of equal or greater importance.

Historical Roots

The beginning of the last century was a time when universal education was being introduced as a response to more restrictive child labor laws and the need to acculturate large numbers of immigrant children. This was a time of great turmoil in education when many new and revolutionary ideas about public education were proposed. The traditionalists believed that all children needed to receive a liberal education including science, math, history, literature, and so forth. Progressive educators, led initially by John Dewey, argued that it was unfair and even elitist to require all students to learn this difficult material. They asserted that students would be better off learning content that was practical, less abstract, and closer to their own experiences. They wanted classrooms that were humane and tailored to the interests of the child. Progressive education has come down to us today in the form of learner-centered instruction methodology. Early progressive educators held other beliefs that they now are less anxious to claim. They were strong advocates of the importance of science as a way of understanding how best to teach students and they promoted the use of standardized tests to assign students to different educational tracks based on their measured ability.

Americans are optimistic, forward-looking, and pragmatic with little patience for old-fashioned ways. It is ironic that advocates of learner-centered methods and prescriptions for learner-centered teaching claim the mantle of "innovative" when their views have remained essentially unchanged since the turn of the century. As John Stone has observed, "Learner-centered education principles underpinned the 'child-centered' schooling of the 1930s, the 'open classrooms' of 1960s, and a long list of other innovations that have been tried and have failed repeatedly in the course of the twentieth century."[15]

Linda Darling-Hammond – executive director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) – claims that learner-centered proposals failed not because they were flawed concepts, but because they "were killed by under-investment in teacher knowledge and school capacity."[16] In her view, learner-centered instruction failed because it was never fully implemented. By implication, Darling-Hammond and other spokespersons for the learner-centered educational viewpoint believe that if only more money had been spent and more teachers instilled with a commitment to these reform methods, they would have succeeded. Despite a century of failure, advocates of learner-centered instruction continue to promote it as an innovation, as a new and better way of teaching. Diane Ravitch has discussed the lengthy history of learned-centered instruction and its repeated failures in her recent book *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms*.

Over 100 years of research consistently shows that direct and explicit teaching methods are more effective than learner-centered methods in increasing academic achievement.

Essential Principles of Learner-Centered Instruction

The learner-centered instructional methodologies that emerged from the Progressive movements of the twentieth century include the following beliefs: (1) constructivism, (2) naturalistic approaches to instruction, (3) idealism, and (4) the importance of process rather than the acquisition of facts.

Constructivism. Learner-centered educators believe that students learn by constructing knowledge. This is another way of stating that in order for new information to be stored in memory it must be integrated with previous learning. Many of these beliefs stem from the work of Jean Piaget and his theories about how cognitive ability develops in children. He used the terms assimilation and accommodation to refer to the constructivist processes in the acquisition of cognitive skills. Constructivists assert that all learning must begin with the familiar. This belief also makes the interests of the child paramount because children find it easiest to construct meaning from familiar, interesting subject matter. On the other hand, requiring students to memorize lists or complete drill and practice tasks are believed to be ineffective classroom activities because they are neither interesting nor familiar.

It is from the emphasis on constructivism that discovery learning emanates. It is believed that when students "discover" or "construct" knowledge on their own, they learn it better and remember it longer than when it is directly taught to them. This is also the basis for the "inquiry" approach to science. With this method of instruction, students base their conclusions on their own investigations rather than being taught them directly. It is considered better for students to make erroneous discoveries than to merely memorize the scientific principles, even if they have the useful characteristic of being accurate. Constructivism also provides the rationale for the new "fuzzy" math promoted by the National Council on the Teaching of Mathematics (NCTM). Instruction based on NCTM principles encourages students to discover answers and solve problems on their own without the benefit of teacher direction.

E. D. Hirsch (1996) describes constructivism as follows:

> Any learning that involves the meaningful use of language is self-evidently constructed learning – unless one believes in thought transference or mental telepathy. The only way a student can understand what a teacher or anyone else is saying is through a complex, sometimes strenuous activity of constructing meaning from words. Hearing a lecture – in the event that one is understanding it – requires an active construction of meaning. Listening, like reading is far from being a passive, purely receptive activity.
>
> But the very universality of constructivism implies certain drawbacks for the practical application of the theory. Since most learning activity, including listening to a lecture, is constructivist, constructivism is an uncertain guide to teaching practice. Regardless of teaching method, the amount of construct activity students engage in can vary for different students under the same

> classroom circumstances. ... There is no necessary relation between the mode of instruction offered by the teacher and the amount of active meaning-construction engaged in by the student. In fact ... the amount of useful construction and learning that occur depends chiefly on the amount of relevant background knowledge the student already possesses rather than on the mode of instruction.[17]

The naturalistic approach to instruction. The learner-centered instructional philosophy asserts that classroom learning is natural and should take place in the same way that speech is acquired. Just as parents are discouraged from overtly teaching their children to speak or correcting their grammar and pronunciation errors – because it is believed that this might interfere with their child's acquisition of language – teachers are urged not to interfere with a child's acquisition of reading or math skills. It is assumed that if students are exposed to the written word or listen to a teacher reading, they will learn to read effortlessly. This method of reading instruction is known as whole language reading instruction. Louisa Cooke Moats makes the following comments about the naturalism of whole-language reading methods.

> Learning to read is not natural. Large numbers of children fail to learn to read with fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. Alphabetic writing systems are a late cultural invention for which we are not biologically specialized. Only some languages have written symbol systems, and many of those writing systems represent whole words, concepts (morphemes), or syllables. Only some of the most recently invented writing systems represent individual speech sounds. Spoken language may be hard-wired in the human brain, but written language is an acquired skill that requires special, unnatural insights about the sound in words. Most children must be taught to read through a rather protracted process in which they are made aware of sounds and the symbols that represent them, and then learn to apply these skills automatically and attend to meaning.[18]

Of course, whole language is not really a method of teaching reading as much as it is a philosophical assertion that there is no need for systematic instruction in reading. The same ideas are promoted in mathematics instruction. Teachers are discouraged from having students memorize math facts and algorithms in favor of providing them the opportunity to solve math problems on their own. It is believed that it is better to have students spend their time in math classes enhancing their high-level thinking skills by discovering how to solve problems than undergoing the drill and practice necessary for the mastery of the basics of mathematics.

Whole language is not really a method of teaching reading as much as it is a philosophical assertion that there is no need for systematic instruction in reading. The same ideas are promoted in mathematics instruction.

Idealism. Learner-centered educational philosophy is wildly idealistic. It looks at a romantic portrait of what an accomplished teacher will do in his or her classroom and imagines an idealized response from the children. As J. E. Stone states:

> It is an approach that encourages the teacher to coax and collaborate rather than instruct. It is an approach that requires the student to initiate and inquire rather than follow teacher direction. In short, it is an ideal form of teaching and one suited to ideal students, i.e., students who are exceptionally mature, eager, and well prepared."[19]

The importance of process rather than the acquisition of facts. Within the learner-centered educator's world-view, learning facts is considered mere "rote memorization," which is unnecessary because students can always look up whatever specific information they need. Similarly, it is believed that students should not be forced to memorize basic math facts because calculators are always readily available. Rather than specify the content to be learned at each grade, learner-centered educators prefer to give teachers freedom to pursue whatever engages the interest of students at the moment. They believe that effective education should have even "fewer rules prescribing what is to be taught, when, and how."[20] It focuses on the process of learning rather than its outcome and it asserts that the struggle to answer questions and solve problems is far more important than obtaining the correct answer.

Learner-centered educators consistently criticize objective testing because it requires "regurgitation" of memorized facts. Organized direct instruction is put down as being "lockstep," "mindless," or "robotic." Teacher-directed practice is termed "drill and kill" or "rote memorization." Schools that encourage content learning and achievement testing are derided as teaching "mere facts" and employing a "one-size-fits-all" curriculum.[21]

Absence of Empirical Support for Learner-Centered Instruction

Students in teacher education programs are taught that learner-centered principles are based on a broad body of research. Education journals are replete with articles espousing these ideals. What education students are not told, however, is that the "research" supporting learner-centered claims of effectiveness are not examples of scientifically rigorous research designed to discover which methods are most effective in increasing achievement. There is little concern about the lack of scientific evidence supporting these beliefs. It is asserted that objective, comparative research is only one way, and not necessarily the best way, to determine which educational policies are most effective. This postmodernist perspective includes the belief that concepts such as academic achievement are socially constructed and are therefore ephemeral. Instead of empirical evidence, they rely on testimonials from teachers or observations of classes in which learner-centered instruction appears to be working.

Gross and Stotsky have outlined several of the weaknesses of this research base. Their conclusion was:

> Given the limitations in design, methodology, and conclusions of many of the individual studies we have examined, and the absence of abundant, sound, and consistent evidence at all educational levels to support the pedagogical or curricular strategies now recommended in schools of education, it is not reasonable for educational policy makers at the state or local school district level to demand systematic adherence to the current visions of the NCTM, AAAS, or NRC standards, or to a constructivist epistemology as now defined in schools of education.[22]

The *Follow Through* study discussed earlier was a massive, half-billion dollar investigation that looked at thousands of children and found that learner-centered teaching methods did not help disadvantaged students. To the contrary, it found that these methods actually produced lower achievement than the traditional teaching methods used in the comparison groups.[23] Despite it being the largest educational study ever undertaken, few education students are exposed to the results of this study in their education classes.

Education school professors in general, and curriculum and instruction experts in particular, play an important role in determining the "what" and "how" of American education, yet their role and their ideas are seldom examined. They are typically in a position to strongly influence the preparation of teachers, the continued professional development of experienced teachers, the curricular content adopted by schools, the instructional methods employed in classrooms, and the policies recommended by state and national curriculum organizations.

Douglas Carnine explains why the learner-centered view of instruction is so pervasive in schools of education and why they are so firmly held.

> Although they wield immense power over what actually happens in U.S. classrooms, these professors are senior members of a field that lacks many crucial features of a fully developed profession. In education, the judgments of "experts" frequently appear to be unconstrained and sometimes altogether unaffected by objective research. Many of these experts are so captivated by romantic ideas about learning or so blinded by ideology that they have closed their minds to the results of rigorous experiments. Until education becomes the kind of profession that reveres evidence, we should not be surprised to find its experts dispensing unproven methods, endlessly flitting from one fad to another. The greatest victims of these fads are the very students who are most at risk.[24]

Learner-centered instruction is very different from the kind of teaching that rigorous, scientific studies have proven effective. It is also different from what the public wants and expects. At the same time, this is the predominant philosophy taught in schools of education and is the only perspective to which most prospective teachers are exposed. It is also the instructional philosophy advocated by state and national curriculum organizations as well as many state departments of education. Education professors know their viewpoint is at odds with the public's expectations of education. Remarkably though, they are certain that the public is wrong. A survey of professors of education found that fully 79 percent felt that "the general public has outmoded and mistaken beliefs about what good teaching means."[25]

Summary

To summarize, there are two distinctly different beliefs about the most appropriate purpose for education. The first acknowledges a body of important content that all students need to learn and asserts that the quality of education can be measured by a determination of how well students are learning it. The second belief system is characterized by skepticism about the existence of a pre-ordained set of content and the use of achievement tests as indicators of school effectiveness. This latter purpose is compatible with a highly critical view of present day American society and the belief that the most important goal of education should be to change it. Advocates of this view assert that if equity and social justice

prevailed in American society, equitable educational outcomes would emerge in learner-centered classrooms. Aligned with these two different beliefs in the purpose of schools are two very different perspectives on instruction. The first is predicated on a belief in the importance of increasing student achievement through structured and systematic direct instruction. It is teacher-centered, while the other approach is learner-centered and emphasizes student construction of knowledge and the value of having students discover answers.

Implications For Teacher Education

Given its widespread public acceptance, it would seem that the conventional goal of increased academic achievement would inevitably prevail in the schools. While it usually is accepted as a policy, it has not prevailed in practice, because most teachers have been trained to use learner-centered teaching methods. The learner-centered/constructivist point of view has dominated teacher training and the teaching profession since the early years of the 20th century. It has also dominated teacher organizations, the learned societies, and the state education bureaucracies.

Educators understand the public's educational aims and they typically attempt to blend the education community's ideals with the realities of public sentiment. Frequently, the result is an educational program that conforms to public expectations only superficially. This analysis is an attempt to show how these competing influences are at work in Oklahoma's efforts to improve teacher quality.

While there is a general desire across the political spectrum to improve the quality and training of teachers, there is little agreement about how best to achieve these goals. The easiest solution to this problem has been for state and federal policymakers to follow the policy guidance of the parties who have been in charge of teacher quality all along. Oklahoma has essentially followed this course. NCTAF is new and so is the NBPTS. However, the education stakeholders they represent are largely the same ones who have set teacher training and licensure standards since the 1950s and before. The result has been the adoption of "new" teacher quality standards that agree with the learner-centered viewpoint that has dominated educational philosophy for the last century. While the adoption of the recommended standards might increase the uniformity of teaching methods used in our schools, they are unlikely to increase academic achievement.

There is widespread agreement that educational reform must include improved teacher quality. What is not clear is how best to achieve that goal. A number of strategies for improving the quality of teachers have been proposed, but most of these have either proven ineffective or have been opposed by a powerful interest group. Some of the strategies for improving teaching that have been proposed are listed below.

- Increase the salaries of all teachers.
- Provide merit pay for the most deserving teachers.
- Use competency tests to eliminate incompetent teachers.
- Permit alternate licensure for qualified candidates who have not attended schools of education.
- Require all teachers to be licensed by accredited teacher education programs.
- Establish national standards for new teachers.
- Reward teachers who obtain National Board of Professional Teachers Standards certification.
- Use a value-added approach to identify the teachers who are most successful in improving the achievement of their students.
- Require candidates for teacher certification to obtain minimum scores on teacher aptitude tests.
- Require teachers to have a college major in the fields in which they intend to teach.
- Require that teacher complete a fifth year or obtain a master's degree before being licensed.

All of the above strategies might be considered possible alternatives for governors, legislatures, and state boards of education that want to improve the quality of education. In practice, several of the above strategies are not even considered for budgetary or political reasons. Consider the strategy of increasing the quality of teachers by greatly increasing their salaries. It has been proposed that such a strategy might permit market forces to attract a better quality of candidates to the teaching field. This is not a viable strategy because personnel costs are already such a large part of state and school district budgets. Furthermore, there is little evidence that such a practice would lead to higher achievement.

Primary among the political constraints is the influence of the teacher organizations. The reality of state-level politics is that in most states, the National Education Association (NEA) and/or the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) are powerful political entities and their preferences for improving teacher quality are understandably influential. Their membership includes a large number of teachers who both register and vote. They influence substantial numbers of other voters as well. These organizations also control an enormous reservoir of Political Action Committee (PAC) money and candidates for office understand that they displease this group at their own risk.

Teacher Improvement Strategies Opposed by the Unions

The primary role of unions is to protect the employment of their members, which means maintaining the seniority system. This necessity substantially limits the possibilities for improving the quality of practicing teachers. The NEA and AFT oppose competency testing of teachers as well as the evaluation of teachers based on student performance. They also have a long-standing policy of opposing merit pay for teachers because merit systems require the imposition of procedures for assessing the performance of teachers and they do not want to open the door to such policies and practices. They are also leery about letting principals and supervisors determine salaries using subjective evaluations. In California, where there has been strong support for teacher evaluations, the California Teachers Association reluctantly acceded only on the condition that fellow teachers would conduct the evaluations.

The most obvious way to improve teacher quality is to reduce the number of ineffective teachers. There are two ways of achieving this goal: (1) removing ineffective teachers presently in the classroom, or (2) preventing ill-prepared teachers from reaching the classroom. Plainly, professional teacher organizations prefer the prevention strategy. Not only does it avoid the difficulties inherent in evaluating practicing teachers, it restricts the supply of teachers in the field, which can drive up demand and lead to higher salaries. Thus, the NEA and the AFT strongly support existing procedures for screening prospective teachers. They support the requirement that all teacher candidates complete the same lengthy training provided by schools of education and the requirement for preservice standardized assessments of teaching ability. On the other hand, they oppose alternative licensure programs that permit the awarding of teaching licenses to individuals who have not completed a teacher education program.

Postmodernists reject the authority of science and assert that all opinions are of equal validity. Until education becomes the kind of profession that reveres evidence, we should not be surprised to find its experts dispensing unproven methods and endlessly flitting from one fad to another.

Although thorough screening of prospective teachers is not the only means of improving teacher quality, it is policy that the NEA and AFT find acceptable; and it is good public policy if the screening process results in an increase in the number of effective teachers. Unfortunately, as will be demonstrated below, the heavy emphasis that current and proposed teacher standards place on ensuring that new teachers are committed to learner-centered instruction is likely to have the opposite effect. It will simultaneously screen out teachers who want to use more effective methods and encourage the use of methods with a long history of failure.

Teacher Training and Licensure Standards Supported by the Unions

The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is the largest accreditor of teacher training programs. It has close ties with the NEA and AFT, both of which maintain congenial policy positions on accreditation. All three organizations are well represented on the National Board of Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS) – a newly instituted program that certifies advanced teacher competencies.

All of these organizations endorse the following strategies for improving the quality of teachers:

- Require that all institutions certifying teachers be accredited by NCATE.
- Require that all teachers be certified through accredited schools of education.
- Establish national standards for new teachers.
- Support and reward teachers who earn NBPTS certification.[26]

Oklahoma's Reforms

The Oklahoma Commission for Teacher Preparation has adopted the recommendations of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF). In so doing, they have accepted the beginning teacher standards of the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), which form the basis for the standards developed for the National Board of Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS). They also support the accreditation standards of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). These four organizations share interlocking directorates and all promote the same instructional philosophy, which is based on learner-centered instruction, constructivism, and a commitment to having schools designate the elimination of social injustice as their primary goal.

National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF)

NCTAF is a national organization that is urging Oklahoma and all other states to adopt the training, licensure, and certification standards of NCATE,

NBPTS, and INTASC. Although called a commission, NCTAF does not have a "commission" from any recognized organization. Rather, the NCTAF is a private organization funded by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. It is comprised primarily of educators who are in philosophic agreement with the goals of the Commission. The four primary goals of NCTAF are as follows.

- Placing control of teacher certification with public agencies that are controlled by teachers and teacher union representatives rather than governors, legislators, and voters.
- Making teacher licensure contingent upon graduation from a school of education accredited by NCATE, thereby eliminating alternate certification programs.
- Requiring new teachers to meet standards for content and pedagogical knowledge such as those promulgated by the INTASC.
- Encouraging and providing financial support to enable teachers to obtain National Board of Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS) certification.[27]

These seem like reasonable proposals and, given the lack of viable alternatives for improving teacher quality, they have been adopted by a large number of states. What is not widely recognized is the degree to which the NCTAF proposals represent the learner-centered pedagogy espoused by the teacher-education community. Standards built on such principles are unlikely to result in the enhanced academic achievement that the American public wants.

Learner-centered instruction – the predominant philosophy taught in schools of education and that to which most prospective teachers are exposed – is very different from the kind of teaching that rigorous, scientific studies have proven effective. It is also different from what the public wants and expects.

Accreditation can work to improve quality where there is a consensus about objectives. These conditions do not prevail in education because professional educators – particularly teacher-educators – have profound disagreements with the public about what is important in education. The public believes that schools should equip students with specific knowledge and skills. Furthermore, they believe that the quality of education should be evaluated by determining how well students have learned this knowledge and mastered these skills. NCTAF, by endorsing NCATE's standards, is encouraging skepticism about the value of traditional curricular content and the use of objectively measured academic achievement as an indicator of school and teacher effectiveness. It is also supporting NCATE's assertions about the necessity of achieving social justice as a first step in the achievement of educational reform.

National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)

The primary accrediting body for schools of education in the United States is the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). The Council of Independent Colleges recently established a second accrediting body – the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC). It is intended to serve small independent schools, not provide an alternative to NCATE.

In professions – such as medicine, engineering, or business – only professional schools of the most questionable reputations are not accredited. For example, accreditation by the American Psychological Association (APA) clearly discriminates between high and low quality psychology programs. It is difficult for psychology students who do not enroll in APA-accredited programs to be accepted at an intern site. Because accreditation is ordinarily such an important indicator of quality, state higher education councils often evaluate colleges and universities based on the percentage of programs that are accredited.

In teacher education, however, accreditation seems to be a less certain indicator of quality. Some of the weakest schools of education in the nation are accredited by NCATE while some of the best ones are not. Ballou and Podgursky point out that 30 percent of teachers who graduate from NCATE schools come from schools that are rated as less than competitive by *Barron's*. Of the 50 top schools of education as rated by *U.S. News and World Report*, only 21 are accredited by NCATE.[28] Even Arthur Wise, the president of NCATE, recognizes the limited reach of NCATE. [29] He points out that almost all other professional schools (such as medicine, architecture, engineering, and law) are accredited, whereas less than half the schools of education are accredited by NCATE.

Despite the assertions of critics like Ballou and Podgursky, NCTAF director Linda Darling-Hammond argues that the best indicator of the quality of a school of education is whether it has been accredited.[30] She and other proponents of NCATE are fond of asking whether a patient would want to have heart surgery performed by a board certified surgeon or

one that was not board certified – implying that this is the sort of choice parents must make regarding the qualifications of their children's teachers. A stronger metaphor for describing NCATE accreditation would be the importance a patient might attach to having a surgeon who is able to speak passionately about the need for universal health care or the importance of ethnic diversity in medicine.

Almost all observers of public schooling agree that students could and should be doing better and that well-prepared teachers can play an essential role in achieving this goal. NCATE agrees that a teacher's education and training are critical elements in establishing effective schools, but their vision of the role of education and the sort of teaching skills that are needed to produce that effectiveness vary substantially from what the public expects. Instead of seeking to insure that teachers are equipped with skills that have been shown to be effective in increasing student achievement, they endorse the adoption of learner-centered instructional methods – ones that put student preferences ahead of curricular expectations.

Key Elements of NCATE Accreditation

An examination of NCATE's publications – both printed and on their Web site – provides only general information about the NCATE accreditation process. The details of the process are usually worked out collaboratively with state accrediting agencies.

A key requirement for a program's accreditation is the Conceptual Framework. The Conceptual Framework is a statement of overarching philosophy around which all other program components are built. NCATE's description of how the Framework should be written is detailed. In contrast, there is much less guidance for the other requirements that must be met for accreditation, such as professional, content, and pedagogical knowledge. Moreover, NCATE requires that institutions provide evidence that their students have the proper "dispositions," i.e., attitudes. There also are requirements for field experiences, faculty qualifications, and appropriate school governance and resources.

The Conceptual Framework

The Conceptual Framework is part of an Institutional Report that shows the relationship between courses and the national, state, and local standards. Specific requirements for the Framework are limited to commitments to learning for all students, diversity, and the use of technology.

The Conceptual Framework is intended to express the faculty's collective vision of its teacher education program. Of course, a school of education faculty is made up of individuals who may not agree about the most mundane of topics. The expectation that they will agree with the philosophical abstractions embodied in these statements is remote at best, particularly since the ideas being promulgated are often controversial.

Consider the Conceptual Framework for the NCATE-approved Professional Educational Unit (PEU) at Oklahoma State University. Its Core Concept and Goals section states that "professional education faculty should seek to prepare individuals who are devoted to the teaching profession, who integrate personal experience and fields of knowledge, who acknowledge and celebrate diversity, who understand the socio-cultural contexts of learning, who believe that everyone deserves the opportunity to learn and can learn, and who are committed to professionalism and lifelong learning." This statement is important not so much for what it says, but for what it fails to include. Consistent with the learner-centered perspective, it places more emphasis on using the schools to change society than to enhance the ability of prospective teachers to improve academic achievement. In its description of the content knowledge and the professional knowledge expected of teachers, the OSU unit emphasizes "integration." Integration is the practice of weaving academic content into its natural context – a staple of learner-centered instruction since the early 1900s.

Commitment to diversity is one of NCATE's most important criteria for judging the quality of a school of education. It is not easy to pin down exactly what they mean when they use this term, but it is apparently intended to mean *multiculturalism*. OSU's statement on diversity requires more than just the milder forms of multiculturalism such as the promotion of cultural awareness, the appreciation of differences, the need to change the attitudes of teacher candidates, and the development of methods of enhancing self-esteem. While they concede that these are all worthy goals, they want faculty and students to go even further.

Consider the following quote from the OSU Conceptual Framework: "During the field experiences, students analyze how race, class, gender, and sexual orientation are enacted in the institutional structures (e.g., tracking) and pedagogical practices in ways that both create and limit possibilities for students. For example, do teachers expect that African American students will adopt White cultural behavioral patterns and preferences in order to be successful in class?"

Although the Framework's authors do not specify the White cultural values to which they are referring, they appear to be promoting a radical form of multiculturalism known as Afrocentrism. Among other beliefs, this form of identity politics includes the

rejection of the notion that schools and teachers have the moral authority to promote conventional educational values. Instead, they justify the promotion of values and beliefs that are in conflict with these conventional educational values.

The OSU Framework further suggests that the most effective teaching is that which accommodates itself to differences among students – a view that is at odds with the evidence of process-product research on teaching. Process-product research has consistently shown conventional direct instruction methods to be more effective than learner-centered approaches for all students. These methods are particularly important for both minority and disadvantaged students – a finding strongly affirmed by Lisa Delpit, an African American educator who has written extensively on this topic.[31]

In summary, the OSU Framework stresses the importance of teachers as change agents and promoters of social justice while giving little attention to their role as instructors responsible for bringing about academic achievement. As one of their first overarching themes they include the following statement: " ... (1) teachers need to recognize themselves as lifelong learners and change agents committed to transforming schools into learning organizations that are as socially just and meaningful as possible. ..."

Content Knowledge

Increasing the content knowledge of teachers is considered a critical step in improving and reforming educational quality. The importance of this teacher attribute is recognized across ideologies and it is widely accepted that a teacher cannot effectively teach a subject with which he or she is not intimately familiar. Both NCATE and INTASC emphasize the need for teachers to have extensive content knowledge, but they do not specify what knowledge the candidates should possess. Instead, they reference the various learned societies that do have explicit standards such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). They do not acknowledge the enormous controversies which characterize debates about the range of knowledge for which students need to be responsible. While the NCATE guidelines are quite explicit about how the Concept Framework is to be prepared, there are no similar guidelines to direct a school in how they are to establish that they have met the other standards. Many states, particularly those that are partners with NCATE and are therefore using the same standards, have content knowledge guidelines. Usually, program sheets, folios, and syllabi are required. Program sheets provide a list of the courses that will be required for a particular certification. Syllabi provide a detailed description of what is included in each course. Folios are prepared for each program that licenses teachers. The folio describes how the concept framework relates to the specific certification. The folio also maps the relationship between the courses included on program sheets and the local, state, and national standards.

NCATE does not distinguish between elementary, middle, and secondary schools in terms of content knowledge. They should. Secondary teachers require detailed knowledge of their fields. Elementary school teachers require an entirely different type of content knowledge. The knowledge required for a high school history teacher must be extensive and in-depth. The conventional way of ensuring content knowledge is through the completion of a prescribed set of courses. Another option would be to assess mastery of content knowledge using standardized tests. The 2000 version of NCATE requires that schools report student performance on national teacher aptitude tests like PRAXIS, which is published by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), or the teacher exams customized for states by the National Evaluation Systems (NES). The NCATE standards do not specify how this information will be used. There is no indication that schools would be denied accreditation based on low performance on these teacher aptitude tests.

The 2000 NCATE standards differ from the previous versions because they require that schools seeking accreditation go beyond merely indicating the set of courses that a student is required to complete. The new standards require evidence that teacher candidates have absorbed what they have been taught in class. Candidate schools are supposed to do this by having prospective teachers "demonstrate their knowledge through critical analysis, synthesis, and inquiry of the subject." What this means in practice is having students submit portfolios. Portfolios are made up of papers and projects that students have completed which attest to their achieving the goals defined in the NCATE and learned society standards. The problem with portfolios is that they only contain what student chooses to include. While they provide indications of what a student knows, they fail to show what he or she does not know. The evaluation of portfolios is highly subjective and it is far too easy for portfolios to degenerate into nothing but assessments of the degree to which students accept the ideological and pedagogical beliefs of NCATE/INTASC and the learned societies with which they are affiliated.

Professional and Pedagogical Knowledge and Skills

Schools seeking NCATE accreditation are required to obtain their standards for professional and peda-

gogical knowledge from the learned societies associated with each discipline. These learned societies uniformly subscribe to learner-centered/constructivist educational philosophies. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) are two well-known examples.

NCTE has a long history of support for the learner-centered "whole language" reading instruction and hostility towards the use of phonics. In the spring of 2000, the congressionally mandated *National Reading Panel* released a two-year study that strongly and scientifically supported the importance of phonics.[32] The panel included only the most rigorous empirical studies utilizing adequate samples and appropriate control over extraneous variables.

NCTM is similarly learner-centered but it has recently been forced to revise its standards. Eminent mathematicians and scientists have charged that the methodology it supports ignores basic skills and algorithms and, instead, emphasizes practical applications and the improvement of student self-esteem.[33] While revisions have made the new standards a little less "fuzzy," they continue to place more emphasis on making students feel good about math than on understanding it. Clearly, the NCTM actions demonstrate a preference for learner-centered instruction – a preference that is enforced by NCATE's insistence that accredited schools of education follow NCTM standards.

In attempting to improve the quality and training of teachers, Oklahoma policymakers have simply followed the policy guidance of the parties who have been in charge of teacher quality all along.

Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support (INTASC)

INTASC was established under the sponsorship of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) for the purpose of rethinking the initial licensing of new teachers. In the 1990s, work began on a set of standards for beginning teachers. The initial draft of the standards was completed in 1992. At that time, there was great excitement about the potential of national standards and national exams to reverse the perceived decline in the achievement of students in this country. It was a natural extension of the so-called "standards movement" to propose improved licensure standards for teacher education. To that end, INTASC standards for prospective teachers were published. The initial standards were intended for all teachers. Standards tailored to mathematics and English/language arts were developed with the expectation that standards in other disciplines would follow. In addition to standards, INTASC proposed the use of performance assessments to determine which prospective teacher candidates possessed the appropriate competencies.

The INTASC standards distinguish between licensure and certification. They define licensure as the initial credential (of course, some states persist in calling this initial credential a "certification"). Once a teacher is licensed and has worked for several years, he or she can seek the higher status of certification, which is now conferred by the National Board of Professional Teacher Standards (NBPTS). The INTASC standards are intended for teachers seeking an initial teacher license, but they incorporate the same proficiencies, though at a more elementary level than experienced teachers are expected to demonstrate when seeking NBPTS certification.

INTASC Standards

The ten principles which form the basis of the INTASC standards are listed below. The standards consist of each principle accompanied by statements of the *knowledge, dispositions,* and *performances* implied by the principle. *Knowledge* refers to the intellectual understandings required of the new teacher. *Dispositions* refer to the attitudes expected of the new teacher. *Performances* refer to the skills the new teacher must demonstrate.

Principle #1: The teacher understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the discipline(s) he or she teaches and can create learning experiences that make these aspects of subject matter meaningful for students.

Principle #2: The teacher understands how children learn and develop, and provides learning opportunities that support their intellectual, social, and personal development.

Principle #3: The teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning and creates instructional opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners.

Principle #4: The teacher understands and uses a variety of instructional strategies to encourage students' development of critical thinking, problem solving, and performance skills.

Principle #5: The teacher uses an understanding of individual and group motivation and behavior to

create a learning environment that encourages positive social interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation.

Principle #6: The teacher uses knowledge of effective verbal, nonverbal, and media communication techniques to foster active inquiry, collaboration, and support interaction in the classroom.

Principle #7: The teacher plans instruction based upon knowledge of subject matter, students, the community, and curriculum goals.

Principle #8: The teacher understands and uses formal and informal assessment strategies to evaluate and ensure the continuous intellectual, social and physical development of the learner.

Principle #9: The teacher is a reflective practitioner who continually evaluates the effects of his/her choices and actions on others (students, parents, and other professionals in the learning community) and who actively seeks out opportunities to grow professionally.

Principle #10: The teacher fosters relationships with school colleagues, parents, and agencies in the larger community to support students' learning and well-being.

"Attitude adjustment" warnings turn colleges of education into re-education camps.

The educational perspective on which these principles are based can best be inferred from consideration of what is not included. There is no indication of any disagreements or differences of opinion about the most effective ways to teach students. Teachers are asked to use a variety of instructional approaches without any indication that one approach might be more effective than another. There is certainly no call for education students to understand the research that has compared the different methods to determine which are more effective. Likewise, education students are supposed to know how children learn, but nothing is mentioned about the differing theories about student learning. In truth, the INTASC standards reflect no disagreements about the effectiveness of various methodologies for the same reason that the NCATE and NBPTS fail to do so. They have concurred on an educational philosophy for which effectiveness and results are not primary considerations.

The principles themselves appear bland, non-ideological, and indifferent to methodology or technique. On the other hand, an examination of the explanation of the principles in the accompanying Knowledge, Dispositions, and Performances reveals a clear commitment to the learner-centered perspective. Consider Principle #3, for example: *The teacher understands how students differ in their approaches to learning and creates instructional opportunities that are adapted to diverse learners*.

In part, the *knowledge* relevant to this principle includes a requirement that teachers understand and utilize "different learning styles, multiple intelligences, and performance modes." Learning styles have a long tradition of research – the outcomes of which have been disappointing to its advocates. Similarly, the notion of multiple intelligences as proposed by Howard Gardner is based only on his own personal philosophy of cognitive functioning.[34] Mainstream experts in the field of intelligence do not accept Gardner's description of multiple intelligences. Of course, this does not concern Gardner and his followers because they are disdainful of the need for empirical proofs.

In some areas, the attitudes and beliefs that education students are supposed to have seem to be contradictory. Consider Principle #3. It states that teachers are supposed to know "about areas of exceptionality in learning – including learning disabilities, visual and perceptual difficulties, and special physical or mental challenges." In the *Dispositions* section associated with the same Principle, the following statement is made: "The teacher believes that all children can learn at high levels and persists in helping all children find success." It is true that students with handicaps can find success, but if one "knows" about areas of exceptionality, one realizes that not all of these students can "learn at high levels."

A revealing analysis of the INTASC standards can be seen in a briefing paper that appeared on the CCSSO web site titled, "Developing a New Paradigm for School Reform." Although there is no author cited, it is actually excerpted from a paper written by Linda Darling-Hammond, which is cross-posted on the NCTAF web site.[35] In this paper, Darling-Hammond laments the failure of Dewey's reforms, which criticized the tendency of our schools to "provide most children with an education that is too rigid, too passive, and too rote oriented to produce learners who can think critically, synthesize and transform, experiment and create ... " While she admits that Dewey's progressivism has failed so far, she insists that this failure is not the result of any deficiency in Dewey's ideas. Like a long line of apologists for Dewey's failed ideas, she believes that if schools would only

invest more money and time, surely these methods would be proved effective. If this were done, it might be possible for schools to realize the dream of a "curriculum aimed at 'higher order' performances and cognitive skills, team teaching, cooperative learning, student-centered instruction and authentic assessment." Not mentioned of course, is the lack of research supporting these methodologies. Clearly, the goal of INTASC is to create a teaching force that is faithful to the goals of John Dewey and latter day learner-centered constructivists.

The INTASC standards seek to achieve uniformity across teacher education programs by making certain that all teacher candidates have learned the same content and acquired the same instructional skills. This strategy can only work if the right content and the most effective instructional skills are being taught. An examination of the literature disseminated by INTASC suggests that these conditions have not been met because learner-centered methods have been anointed as the only acceptable methodology. To accept the INTASC assumptions about effective instruction also requires one to eschew the importance of student academic achievement in favor of the goal of promoting social justice. Success in getting all prospective teachers to adopt a narrow set of learner-centered/constructivist beliefs would be disastrous for American education because empirical research clearly demonstrates that these methods are far from optimal.

It is not easy to determine whether prospective teachers have acquired the necessary skills and knowledge that would make them effective teachers without placing them in the classroom. It is only in this setting, by determining how much their students have learned, that one can make an ultimate judgment about the skills of prospective teachers. Since such a process is wholly impractical, schools of education typically require that their students complete a required curriculum, complete student teaching, and at some schools pass an examination. INTASC suggests another alternative – the use of performance assessments. Of course, a true performance assessment would place candidates in the classroom and have them teach. Portfolios are not performance assessments and are as indirect as pencil-and-paper measures of teacher effectiveness.

The Meaning of 'Dispositions' in the NCATE and INTASC Standards

Both the NCATE and the INTASC standards place considerable importance on student "dispositions." The term is not defined, but it apparently refers to the affective aspect of teacher education. Candidates are supposed to reflect the dispositions of professional educators as delineated in professional, state, and institutional standards. In other words, students are not only expected to accept the NCATE and INTASC standards, they are also supposed to endorse them enthusiastically and without reservation. The NCATE standards further specifies, "Candidates recognize when their own dispositions may need adjustment and are able to develop a plan to do so."[36] A student harboring an inappropriate attitude is supposed to recognize these bad thoughts and excise them. This sort of admonition turns a school of education into a re-education camp with the unpleasant odor of totalitarian self-criticism.

'Performance Assessments'

The most effective way to assess the effectiveness of a teacher is to determine how much his or her students have learned. Such assessments are not favored by INTASC and NCATE because the postmodernist philosophy they have adopted disdains the use of objective evidence to prove anything. Instead, they prefer portfolios, which they incorrectly identify as a type of "performance assessment." Placing a collection of student writing together in a notebook is not a performance assessment, even if it is labeled a portfolio, because it lacks the critical characteristic of directness. Portfolios serve the purposes of INTASC and NCATE because these organizations are primarily interested in determining the degree to which students demonstrate the capacity to express ideological solidarity with NCATE/INTASC philosophies and practices. Requiring that students submit portfolios is relatively inexpensive and demands little from faculty as long as no one spends much time actually looking at the portfolios.

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS)

The purpose of National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certification is to provide a way for the teaching profession to recognize highly accomplished teachers. This certification signals to a teacher's peers that he or she has been judged as having met rigorous professional standards. According to the information provided by NBPTS, a teacher awarded this certification has demonstrated the ability, in a variety of settings, to make sound professional judgments about students' best interests and to act effectively on those judgments. Unfortunately, the format of the NBPTS assessment process is not conducive to accurate assessments of whether teachers have actually achieved these goals. Nor does the process determine whether the chosen teachers are any better than their peers at increasing academic achievement in their class-

rooms.

The NBPTS was strongly supported by Secretary of Education Riley and President Clinton, who highlighted it in his 1997 State of the Union Speech in which he urged federal support in order to add an additional 100,000 teachers to the ranks of those already certified. Many states provide financial support for teachers seeking certification and/or to reward teachers who have obtained this certification. Oklahoma provides a $5,000 dollar salary increase for those who obtain this certification. In other states, teachers are given sizeable cash awards for obtaining the certification. In California, they are given $10,000 and an additional $20,000 if they agree to work in a low-performing school district. Minnesota provides a $25,000 bonus.

Myron Lieberman is credited with the original idea for a national teacher certification program, which he first proposed in the 1960s. He was interested in having neutral independent boards evaluate teachers. The purpose of his proposal was to provide an alternative to the merit pay programs being proposed in several states at the time. He envisioned these certification boards as being independent from both school administrators and the teacher unions. A neutral organization such as the Educational Testing Service would conduct the assessment. He brought this idea to Albert Shanker, who was at that time the president of the American Federation of Teachers. Shanker was enthusiastic about the idea and took the lead in establishing NBPTS. The organization that resulted was different from the one envisioned by Lieberman. Instead of being independent, the NBPTS maintained a close relationship with both the NEA and AFT.

The NBPTS was established with a $1 million dollar grant from the Carnegie Foundation in 1987 and it has been the beneficiary of large amounts of both foundation and federal funds since then. Wilcox reports that by 1999, NBPTS had received $70 million in federal funds and had become a powerful organization. Adding 100,000 teachers as planned, at $2,000 a teacher, will provide an additional $200 million for its coffers.

The Certification Process

The certification process takes place in two stages. In the first stage of the process, candidates must submit a six-part performance-based assessment portfolio that is expected to take at least 120 hours. Following their application and payment of fees, the candidate is sent detailed instructions about how to prepare the portfolio for their particular area of specialization. The candidate is expected to use current classes and students to provide evidence of accomplished teaching practice.

The six parts of the portfolio can be further divided into three sections. The first two portfolio entries 1 and 2 make up the first section. This is where the candidate submits examples of student work accompanied by a written commentary "reflecting" on the students' progress. The emphasis in the evaluation of this submission is on the candidate's ability to discuss his or her pedagogical philosophy. Neither the candidate's level of content knowledge or the performance of the students is being evaluated here. Instead, the focus is on the candidate's capacity to combine different disciplines and tap a child's natural interests. Of particular importance is the candidate's ability to perform an informal assessment recognizing the unique aspects of the instructional setting and demonstrate his or her ability to adjust the lesson to accommodate the attributes and interests of the students and their families. These indicators of teacher competence are a direct expression of the learner-centered educational philosophy around which the entire NBPTS evaluation process is built. In particular, this section focuses on how flexibly the teacher can tap into the children's interests rather than how effectively pre-specified content was presented or learned.

Entries 3 and 4 make up the second section of the portfolio. This section requires the submission of two 15- to 20-minute videotapes. The content of the videotapes varies depending upon the area in which the teacher is seeking certification. The actual requirements for each certification area are not available on the extensive NBPTS web site, but are sold for $15 to those interested. However, in many of the areas the Board allows only learner-centered activities such as class discussions or "community building activities" rather than any direct instruction of academic content.[37] While the instructions provided to candidates describe the videotapes as unedited, this description is undermined by frequent references to the time and effort that will be required for the taping. Many candidates feel the need to invest in expensive equipment, hire experts, or hope that their school system can provide this sort of technical expertise that is necessary. This has two unfortunate results. First, the connection between a highly edited tape that is the culmination of many hours of taping and the typical teaching behavior of a candidate may be minimal. Second, success in being awarded a certificate becomes even more dependent on the amount of money a candidate is willing to spend. The initial fee of $2,000 is already quite steep.

The third section of the portfolio is made up of entries 5 and 6. These include the out-of-classroom activities of teachers. For portfolio entry 5, the candi-

date is required to keep a log of all professional activity other than teaching in the classroom and to describe how he or she has served in a leadership role. Entry 6 is intended to assess the candidate's level of parental involvement. This is accomplished through the submission of a log of parental contacts and events held for parents.

Nowhere in the portfolio process does the NBPTS ask for evidence of student learning. In fact, the nature of these portfolio entries can be interpreted as advocating a de-emphasis on academic achievement. Once again, the learner-centered underpinnings of the NBPTS assessment and its rejection of the public's desire for measurable achievement gains are revealed. Even more surprising, NBPTS does not observe the candidates in actual live lessons, a requirement in every pre-service evaluation in the country. Without any direct observation of the candidates while teaching, the NBPTS portfolio is less demanding than the requirements for obtaining an initial teaching license.

The second stage of the certification process requires that candidates respond to four constructed response questions presented at an assessment center such as the Sylvan Learning Center. Candidates are given 90 minutes to respond to each question and this part of the assessment is normally completed in a single day of testing. Of course, candidates must devote a considerable amount of time studying for the exam. The NBPTS provides guidance and stimulus materials suggesting the nature of the questions to be answered months in advance of the test. There is also a great deal of interest and discussion of past and upcoming questions from the test on Internet listserves devoted to NBPTS certification. The essays are not intended to provide a measure of content knowledge as much as a determination of the candidates' capacity to display pedagogical knowledge, which is demonstrated through a process of relating theories to concrete teaching situations. As one critic noted, "The only criterion that the Board appears to be evaluating is how well a teacher can justify *why* she did something. Identifying someone as being good at justifying her actions is not the same as identifying someone as being an effective teacher. The Board seems to have confused the two."[38]

The performance expectations for candidates seeking an NBPTS certification fall far short of what might be expected of an undergraduate student seeking a teaching license. A teacher education program that required no more than videotaped vignettes and a compilation of abstractions on essay tests would not be looked on favorably by the surrounding school districts. It is axiomatic among teacher educators that the evaluation of teaching skills requires the observation of a teacher in the act of teaching, rather than the examination of essays. In addition, responsible teacher education programs require student teachers to provide evidence that the children they have taught have learned what they were taught.

The NBPTS certification process is selective. Less than half of the applicants succeed in earning a certificate in their initial attempt. The indicators on which they are so carefully screened, however, bear no clear relationship to the instructional skills that the public expects of good teachers.

The Validity of NBPTS

There is little evidence that NBPTS certification will increase the number of skilled teachers in classrooms or improve the academic performance of students. Instead of being part of the solution, NBPTS seems to be part of the problem.

The NBPTS literature heavily emphasizes educational outcomes. Unfortunately, the outcomes to which they refer are not student achievement. The NBPTS documentation makes it clear that the most important outcome expected of a successful candidate is their ability to submit written statements that reflect learner-centered/constructivist educational beliefs. For the portfolio section, there is no process for assuring that the beliefs expressed are even those of the candidate. The only validity check is the requirement that a colleague sign a statement verifying that the candidate participated in the professional activities claimed and has had the contacts with parents that are described. Ultimately, NBPTS certification can only indicate how well a candidate can assemble a portfolio and respond to a series of essay questions. It is difficult to see how this system is a significant improvement over the traditional methods of identifying a good teacher through "paper" credentials and observations by principals.

The Department of Education provided millions of dollars to finance the original implementation of NBPTS. In exchange for this funding, the NBPTS was supposed to provide an objective evaluation of the program. No appropriate evaluation has been provided. Buday and Kelly, in an otherwise supportive article about NBPTS certification, describe how the

National Board has studied the impact of assessment on candidates for certification. They state that, "Preliminary data are in the form of anecdotes and testimonials from candidates, virtually all of whom report that the process offers tremendous potential for improving student learning."[39] While this establishes that it is possible to find successful candidates who will speak well of this certification, it hardly provides evidence that supports the effectiveness of the certification program. There is no evidence supporting the claim that students taught by teachers with NBPTS certification perform better in school, and neither is there any evidence that the instructional methods that candidates are required to display in their portfolios are effective.

The October 25, 2000 edition of *Education Week* featured the following front-page headline: "Certification Found Valid for Teachers."[40] One must read the article, or even better the actual study, to see that the headline writer was engaging in hyperbole. First, the study was not conducted by an independent entity, nor was it subjected to any form of peer review through publication in a professional journal. Instead, it was conducted and disseminated by the NBPTS itself.

The NBPTS heavily emphasizes educational outcomes. Unfortunately, the outcomes to which they refer are not student achievement.

The NBPTS's study compared 31 teachers who were board certified with 34 who were unsuccessful in their attempt to become certified. The participants in the study were recruited from the pool of those who had passed and failed certification in North Carolina, Ohio, and Washington D.C. Although the reader is repeatedly told that the evaluators did not know who was certified and who was not, that information is readily available at the NBPTS web site. Participants in the study were "recruited" rather than randomly selected from the population of all successful and unsuccessful candidates. Such a practice makes generalizations to the population of all board certified teachers problematic. It also makes discussion of statistical significance moot because this concept rests on the assumption that the samples were selected randomly from populations.

The most important question about the validity of the NBPTS is whether certified teachers are more effective in bringing about student achievement than teachers who are not certified. This question could best be answered by comparing the academic performance of students taught by certified teachers with students taught by teachers who were not certified. The NBPTS study failed to examine this question. Instead, the NBPTS validation study simply looked at whether the attributes teachers were required to demonstrate to obtain the original certification remained present when re-measured.

Instead of reporting reliability coefficients, the study's authors provide levels of significance. Correlation coefficients between the original score on the NBPTS assessment and the scores obtained on their follow-up study would have been more informative because they at least would have provided a standard measure of reliability.

Subjects were compared on 15 dimensions, of which only two were related to student performance. The first 13 dimensions assessed whether teachers who were certified displayed the sort of learner-centered teaching behaviors valued by the NBPTS. Not surprisingly, they did. NBPTS has defined good teaching as learner-centered instruction and the teachers awarded certificates do indeed teach this way, otherwise, they would not have been certified in the first place. When the certified teachers were subsequently compared with those who failed the certification process, the certified teachers again demonstrated that they embrace the methods and philosophy that got them certified. By comparison, those who were denied certification failed to demonstrate these behaviors and attitudes – at least to the same degree. Based on this circular evidence, the authors of the NBPTS report concluded that certified teachers display the behaviors required for certification more consistently than those denied certification. Clearly, this data cannot answer questions about which teachers are best equipped to produce student achievement.

The two remaining dimensions assessed student outcomes; the first consisted of an examination of student class work, which is the same type of information used to determine which teachers would be certified originally. The authors of the study assert that the students taught by certified teachers "differ in profound and important ways from those taught by less proficient teachers." Unlike the assessments of the other dimensions, there is no mention of statistical significance. What they have discovered is that the work completed by students taught by teachers who were certified was similar to the student work they submitted to become certified originally. By definition, it was somewhat better than that submitted by teach-

ers who were not certified, because that is one of the reasons why this latter group of teachers was not certified.

The second assessment of student outcomes was an evaluation of student responses to prompts provided by the researchers. It is difficult to evaluate the results of this analysis because there were no controls to ensure that the students were of the same ability level in the two groups, but overall, they found no differences between the students in the two groups in their written responses to the prompts.

Instead of validating the NBPTS through an empirical analysis of student achievement, the NBPTS's own study merely demonstrated that teachers who had been certified continue to exhibit the same behaviors and express the same beliefs that got them certified in the first place. Those who failed to be certified continue to be unable to sufficiently demonstrate the behaviors and dispositions required for certification. Nothing in this report tells the public whether the enormous investment in NBPTS certification will result in higher levels of academic performance by students.

The lack of an empirical basis supporting the NBPTS should not be surprising. It is consistent with the accreditation requirements of NCATE and the policies of NCTAF and INTASC. None of these organizations place much importance on the need to provide empirical evidence for their assertions about student learning for two reasons. First, they do not believe that the most important outcome of teaching is academic achievement. Second, they do not believe that answers to questions about which strategies should be used in the classroom can be found in scientific or empirical investigations.

NBPTS and Learner-Centered Instruction

The NBPTS commitment to learner-centered instructional methods comes through clearly in the materials produced by this organization just as it does for NCATE and INTASC. Consider the first of five propositions published by NBPTS that define their philosophy: "Teachers are committed to students and their learning." While this statement appears to be an unqualified commitment to academic achievement, an examination of the accompanying rationale paints a different picture. Consider the following statement:

> They [accomplished teachers] develop students' cognitive capacity and their respect for learning. Equally important, they foster students' self-esteem, motivation, character, civic responsibility, and their respect for individual, cultural, religious, and racial differences.[41]

This statement makes it clear that the NBPTS expects the accomplished teacher to be focused on the development of cognitive capacity rather than academic content and it places a premium on intellectual stimulation without regard to mastery of content. The NBPTS commitment to learning is weak and buried among five competing commitments, making it likely that academic achievement will take a back seat to just about anything that comes along. It is simply not possible to have five bottom lines and be able to set reasonable priorities.

By contrast, the NBPTS commitment to learner-centered principles is obvious and can be easily illustrated. For example, the following statement from the NBPTS document *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do* demonstrates a clear commitment to contextual learning – a staple in the learning-centered philosophy of instruction.

> They [accomplished teachers] know, for instance, that students who cannot flawlessly recite multiplication tables may still be able to multiply in other contexts (e.g., in calculating whether they have enough money for items at the grocery store). Accomplished teachers ... strive to provide multiple contexts in which to promote and evaluate those abilities.[42]

Learner-centered doctrine asserts that instruction embedded in a life-like context is always superior to any alternative. Successful NBPTS candidates will understand from this example that simple practice activities, no matter how effective in developing skills, will not demonstrate that they are "accomplished teachers." Instead, they will recognize that providing an unusual context for a math activity will be prized whether or not the activity results in learning.

In the statement that informs candidates about what they should include in their responses, the NBPTS states that accomplished teachers "incorporate the prevailing theories of cognition and intelligence in their practice." Why the reference to "prevailing theories" instead of "proven knowledge"? Again, this is done because the NBPTS standards look at teaching through the prism of learner-centered doctrine, not through a framework built on evidence of effectiveness. *What Teachers Should Know and Be Able to Do* makes the Board's preference clear.

> In addition to particular knowledge of their students, teachers use their understanding of individual and social learning theory, and of child and adolescent development theory, to form their decisions about how to teach. They are familiar with the concepts generated by social and cognitive scientists that apply to teaching and learning. Moreover, they integrate such knowledge with their personal theories of learning and development generated from their own practice. For example, accomplished teachers know that old theories of a

monolithic intelligence have given way to more complex theories of multiple intelligences. Current thinking no longer casts "intelligence" as a context-free, one-dimensional trait. Instead, it recognizes different kinds of intelligence – linguistic, musical, mathematical, spatial, kinesthetic, personal. This perspective also holds that there are variations in the sources of intelligence (e.g., practical experience versus formal study) and the forms of intelligence (e.g., procedural skills versus propositional knowledge).[43]

Without referencing it directly, NBPTS is referring to Howard Gardner's popular theory of "multiple intelligences." As noted above in the discussion of INTASC standards, Gardner's theories are based on his personal speculations, not the scientific study of cognitive functioning. E. D. Hirsch states that while multiple intelligences and learning styles are readily accepted by learner-centered educators, "neither the multiple intelligences theory nor the similar learning styles theory is well accepted in the scientific community."[44] In essence, by its prominent attention to Gardner, NBPTS displays an alarming disregard for evidence and an apparent preference for the popular and faddish.

Beginning teachers have been taught to believe that the students' grasp of important knowledge and skill is less important than the process used to teach them.

Conclusions About the NBPTS

The promise of NBPTS was the identification and recognition of exemplary teachers. Increasing the number of skilled teachers in classrooms could certainly improve the academic performance of students, if the skills in question were the right skills. Identifying and rewarding these teachers would likewise be a positive step in achieving the laudable goal of making teaching more professional. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that NBPTS certification will serve either purpose. The most important characteristic a candidate needs to ensure that they are awarded certification is a willingness to spend a lot of money and devote a great deal of time in the pursuit of this goal. Second, they need to possess the writing skills that will enable them to express their unreserved commitment to the learner-centered/constructivist viewpoint favored by NTBTS. Neither of these characteristics translates into effective teaching. Instead of being held accountable for successfully teaching academic content to their students, those who want to be recognized as "accomplished teachers" must explain to the NBPTS reviewers how their classroom activities are building self-esteem and a sense of community, or recognizing multiple intelligences and learning styles. Instead of being part of the solution, the Board seems to be a part of the problem. Promoting NBPTS certification will only serve to promote educational practices that have a long record of ineffectiveness.

The Four Pillars of Teacher Education Reform

Policymakers should understand that NCATE, NCTAF, NBPTS, and INTASC represent the same educational interests that have governed the teaching profession for 50 years. They are not independent organizations whose reform initiatives have serendipitously come to the same conclusions about how teachers should be prepared. Instead, they are separate bodies with interlocking directorships, and their policies agree with each other and with those of the NEA and AFT. In essence, they are the long-established teacher education community purporting to reform itself.

NCATE's role is to insist that all teachers graduate from schools that are accredited by NCATE, that practicing teachers be encouraged to earn NBPTS certification, and that states set up independent teacher certification boards. INTASC has collaborated with NCATE and NBPTS to develop licensure standards for new teachers and a process for assessing whether students have achieved these standards. The INTASC standards are intended to be compatible with the NBPTS certification standards. The chair of the committee that drafted the INTASC standards is Linda Darling-Hammond – the executive director of NCTAF.

According to proponents of these reforms, graduation from an NCATE-accredited school as a prerequisite for licensure is analogous to the requirements that exist for other professions. They cite as an example the 1910 Flexner Report. At that time, a process was needed to ensure that all physicians possessed the important knowledge about medicine that was rapidly becoming available so accreditation became an accepted indicator of quality. However, there are important differences between the state of medicine in the early 20th century and the state of teacher education in the early 21st century.

One key difference is that medical schools train practitioners who enter an open marketplace. Incompetent practitioners would lose their patients and drag down the reputations of both the training pro-

grams and their profession. It was of vital importance to the success of both the medical schools and established members of the profession to ensure that the public would accept newly trained and licensed physicians. By contrast, educators practice their profession under a very different set of circumstances. Public schools are a regulated monopoly in which professional success depends less on the opinion of parents and the lay public than on that of educational administrators and fellow teachers. The outcomes of educational practice are not immediate and obvious. Parents lack access to data, and even where data is available they may lack the expertise to understand it. Teachers advance their careers in public schooling, in part, by teaching in ways that are congenial with the dominant educational philosophy to which their superiors and peers subscribe.

The other key difference is that in the early 20th century, the medical community and the public agreed about the proper aims of medical practice. In contrast, there is little agreement either in the public or the education community about the purpose of public schools. There is not even agreement about the importance of the acquisition of knowledge. Instead, beginning teachers have been taught to believe that the students' grasp of important knowledge and skills is less important than the process used to teach them. In particular, certain teaching methods have been deemed ideal by the teacher training community, i.e., the learner-centered methods encouraged by NCTAF, NCATE, INTASC, and NBPTS.

The adoption of a learner-centered instructional philosophy also serves to deflect blame for unacceptable educational outcomes from schools and teachers to families and communities. It blames social injustice, rather than ineffective teaching, for educational failure. Educators are taught that schools can reasonably be held accountable only when society reforms itself, parents do their job, and students take responsibility for doing their part.

Over many decades, teacher educators have taught their students that the educational outcomes sought by parents and policymakers will emerge from learner-centered schooling if only society will commit itself to bringing about the necessary preconditions. They believe that focusing on inspiring children and attempting to make all lessons socially relevant and exciting will ensure that all students will become self-motivated to learn to read, perform mathematical computations, learn science and social studies, etc. There is little recognition of the need to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to help their students meet the increasingly challenging academic standards being adopted by states across the nation.

Oklahoma Teacher Education Reforms

Oklahoma's teacher quality reforms follow the recommendations of Darling-Hammond, NCTAF, NCATE, and INTASC. Oklahoma requires teacher candidates to master 15 competencies. The first 10 are directly from INTASC. Competencies 11 through 15 come from input from Oklahoma sources. They include career knowledge, lifelong learning, and the legal aspects of teaching. Competencies 14 and 15 are required by Oklahoma law and include familiarity with Oklahoma's core curriculum and the state teacher-evaluation process.

By following the NCTAF recommendations, Oklahoma has charted a non-controversial course – insofar as the education community is concerned. The problem with following this course is that it is doubtful whether it will substantially improve the achievement of Oklahoma's K-12 students. Whether those who selected this approach to reform did so because they believe that increased social justice is key to increasing student achievement is not known. Neither is it known whether Oklahoma's commitment to learner-centered schooling was intentional or merely result of following the NCTAF's recommendations.

In the March 2000 issue of *The World of OCTP*, the executive director of the Oklahoma Commission for Teacher Preparation proudly announced that Oklahoma's teacher preparation program was rated third by the *Education Week*'s publication *Quality Counts*.[45] The *Quality Counts* report, however, is sponsored by the Pew Foundation – a longtime supporter of the NCTAF reforms – and Oklahoma's reforms slavishly adhere to their recommendations. In contrast, the Fordham Foundation gave Oklahoma a score of 27.86 out of 60 and a grade of "C."[46]

Oklahoma needs to consider whether the reforms it is adopting are consistent with its educational aims. Like every state except for Iowa, Oklahoma is seeking to increase student achievement as assessed by standardized tests that are based on state academic standards. The evidence presented in this analysis suggests that the teacher quality reforms adopted by the OCTP represent a commitment in a different direction. This conflict exists because the OCTP's adopted standards mandate teaching practices that seek outcomes broader than "mere" student achievement.

Under the guise of vaguely stated pedagogical reforms, NCTAF, NCATE, NBPTS, and INTASC are promoting the adoption of an approach to teaching that is at odds with the educational aims of the public. In effect, new teachers are being taught beliefs, methods and attitudes which will undermine Oklahoma's efforts to improve student achievement. ✪

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