

Certified Ineptitude

Most teacher certification programs promote practices that hinder academic achievement.

By George K. Cunningham

Many people wonder how faculties of education have managed to survive in the face of withering criticism from all sides. There is a simple answer. Faculties of education are very popular with university presidents because they bring in so much money.

Education classes have large enrollments but do not require elaborate or expensive equipment. The faculty are always among the lowest-paid in the university. As a result, faculties of education are the most profitable unit in a university. No university president is going to get rid of a such a good money-maker.

These faculties are certainly going to survive, but the more important question is whether they will be relevant. To answer this question it is necessary to define two distinctly-different belief systems in education.

The first of the two belief systems asserts that the most important purpose of education is the enhancement of academic achievement. For the most part, the public, legislators, and parents all support this position. Proponents of this view want students to increase their reading comprehension, become more skilled at performing mathematical computations, know history, and understand science.

The operational definition of academic achievement is performance on academic achievement tests. The adoption of academic achievement as the primary purpose for our schools is an assertion that schools are best evaluated in terms of how their students perform, rather than by what the teachers are doing.

The selection of instructional method is determined through an examination of their effectiveness in terms of academic achievement. Since the mainstream research is solidly behind direct instruction, informed proponents of academic achievement typically endorse methods such as systematic phonics.

Faculties of education, the teachers' unions, ministry of education staff, and school boards have a different focus. They believe that instructional methods should be evaluated in terms of their fidelity to a progressive philosophy of education. Their focus is on "learning" rather than academic achievement.

While the terms "academic achievement" and "learning" may appear to refer to the same activities, the instructional methods designed to enhance "learning" are primarily child-centred and may not only fail to increase academic achievement, they may actually degrade it.

Instead of *teaching* students, many educators believe it is the role of a good teacher to create the proper environment for learning and, if done properly, students will learn by constructing their own meaning. Learning, unlike academic achievement, is evaluated in terms of what the teacher is doing. It does not require an assessment of what is happening to the students in the classroom.

While it might seem surprising that there are educators who de-emphasize the importance of academic achievement, this is a common practice within the educational establishment. Faculties of education are committed to teaching their students how to create student-centred classrooms in which students are expected to teach themselves and each other.

There may be reasons to adopt this approach to instruction, but even its strongest adherents would agree that increased academic achievement would not be among them.

The man on the street typically believes that teacher certification is indicative of a more highly-skilled teacher, one who can lead his or her students to higher academic achievement. He does not realize that teacher certification programs promote practices that are actually antithetical to student academic achievement.

I was at a luncheon for our faculty last year when another professor showed up late flushed with excitement. He teaches the math preparation classes for students seeking certification as elementary school teachers. Of course, everyone wanted to know what had gotten him so excited.

He told us he was so worked up because he had just taught his best class ever. He said that for the entire class he did not say a word, and the students had taught each other.

This professor believes that instruction in an education school is successful to the extent that students can be convinced to follow his example in their own classrooms. This is the sort of instruction students are getting in education schools and epitomizes why such instruction is not going to lead to better performance on academic achievement tests.

There are the two major competing philosophies in education. One asserts that teachers should focus on increasing their students' academic achievement. The other dismisses the importance of academic achievement and instead defines good teaching as the creation of a classroom atmosphere that eschews explicit instruction in favour of giving responsibility for learning to the students.

The two approaches are incompatible and there is really no way to create a compromise between the two. The question left unanswered is who gets to decide between the two.

Most legislative bodies, by virtue of voting for accountability systems, have declared that academic achievement should be paramount. Most members of the education industry have decided otherwise. We shall have to await the outcome of this contest, but currently it seems as if the educators are winning.

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