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EVALUATING PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS OF READING IN CBTE

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Competency based teacher education (CBTE) curricula are being considered or developed by at least half of the state education departments according to a survey by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (Andrews, 1972).¹ Coupled with this is the development of an increasing number of competency based reading methods courses and curricula. Those working on the development of these programs, quickly become aware of the problems encountered when attempting to combine theory and practice. Solving problems of identifying competencies, time-based curricula, grading, faculty teaching load, etc., at times seems overwhelming. However, a single issue in CBTE involves each area mentioned above and is yet unique in itself. That is, "How does one assess competence?"

What kind of competence?

Defining curricula to produce competent teachers of reading must begin with an identification of the skills a competent teacher of reading possesses. This is followed by determining how and if these skills can be developed in the teacher training institution. Traditionally, the education of the pre-service teacher of reading has focused on the knowledge aspect of teaching reading. Assessment was primarily of the paper-pencil format. Whether this assessment technique had any validity in predicting the ability the student might have in teaching reading was seldom, if ever, established. Assessment of teaching ability was left to the student teaching supervisor. Thus, those paid to train teachers of reading seldom knew if their efforts were successful. In theory, the well-developed CBTE curriculum would provide the teacher-trainer with an opportunity to assess competence in the field (Andrews, 1973).² Opportunity may be an inaccurate term, for in 'pure' terms, teaching competence must necessarily be field assessed. However, each competency in a CBTE curriculum, while relating to eventual teaching success, need not necessarily involve field assessment.

Cognitive assessment.

A CBTE curriculum can follow many paths for developing specific competencies to be attained. The simplest path requires little change from the traditional format. Those charged with the responsibility of training teachers of reading can construct objectives requiring only the mastery of

factual information. This path requires only that the teacher-trainer specify precisely what the student is to know. Assessment follows by having the student list, choose, describe, or discuss facts, names, techniques, etc. Once developed, these objectives and assessment techniques at least offer the teacher-trainer an opportunity to observe what students know about the teaching of reading. Still lacking, however, is assessment of the proficiency in teaching reading.

Assessment at the cognitive level is a necessary component of a CBTE curriculum. There is certain factual knowledge students need to grasp prior to application. However, a curriculum that assesses only cognitive mastery and omits the assessment of application of that knowledge is far from the ideal CBTE program. Students who can list, describe, and discuss will not necessarily have the ability to successfully apply the methods, techniques, and principles in a field setting.

Experience assessment.

A second level for CBTE curricula involves requiring students to experience, or participate in the teaching of reading in conjunction with learning at the cognitive level. Students are placed in classrooms to observe and often tutor children in reading. Assessment may involve only attendance; if a student is present on assigned dates he has mastered the objectives. Assessment may alternatively come from a cooperating teacher, or the student might keep a cumulative log listing daily lessons and submit this for assessment. These approaches to assessing competence still isolate the teacher-trainer from actual assessment of teaching skill. An evaluation of ability to teach reading is still second hand, at best.

A primary issue in CBTE centers on a third approach to the assessment of competence. If teacher training institutions are graduating prospective teachers, who are in turn issued teaching certificates, someone evidently assumes teaching competence. However, as mentioned earlier, in most cases the teacher-trainer is isolated from a direct assessment of teaching competence. The direct assessment issue presents problems which are not easily handled in the present teacher training model.

Direct assessment.

Many of the problems encountered in the development of a field based component deal with the administrative structure of universities (Lorraine and Daniels, 1972).⁴ Once these problems are worked out the development of the field-based component can begin. The teacher-trainer might, for instance, have the responsibility for eight pre-service teachers and be provided with eight classrooms of elementary school children. Each classroom would be staffed with an experienced teacher who had demonstrated competence in teaching reading, as well as completed in-service training directed at the evaluation of pre-service teachers. The pre-service teachers would have completed a course in reading methods with finalization of requirements entailing the demonstration of teaching

competence in reading.

Here, however, one is faced with the persistent question of, “What constitutes evidence of a successful demonstration of teaching competence?” If the reading methods course received, focused on knowing about reading, the teacher-trainer may be on shaky ground to assume a transfer effect. Knowing about basal readers, or even basal reader lessons, is not equivalent to being able to effectively employ these materials or methods. Likewise, knowing about sight word lists, structural analysis, context, or main idea is not equivalent to ability to teach the same. Even more complicated than being able to teach these skills, is knowing when to teach them.

Thus, the teacher-trainer may have to begin by modeling, or by providing a model, of exemplary teaching. Someone somewhere must demonstrate what will be considered as competence. Cognitive knowledge from a classroom-based learning experience does not automatically transfer, even when the teaching of reading is taught, as opposed to the history of reading instruction, or an introduction to reading materials. If we are to develop teaching competence, something more than the traditional survey course will necessarily be involved.

The ideal background course(s) would provide not only a survey of materials and historical data, but also include audio- or video-tapes of teaching performances. These would include a wide range of skills, styles, and techniques. The student would arrive at the field-based component with a strong background of experiences. Having had opportunities for simulation in decision making, role playing in teaching techniques, as well as a store of cognitive data on history, theory, methods, and materials. The task is now to place the student in the teaching role with children. A field-based component would provide the opportunity for the student to select pupils and present them with short teaching episodes. Though the student has been provided with a demonstration course the teacher-trainer may yet be aghast at some teaching performances and wonder how certain students successfully completed the foundation course. In light of the evaluation, the student may be informed that competence is yet to be established. This leads the student to the teacher-trainer in quest of the reasons for failure. The teacher-trainer must have well defined criteria for the successful completion of a teaching episode. Ambiguous, or nebulous criteria for defining mastery fail to identify deficiencies and strengths. Without these criteria deficiencies persist without remediation. Assessment must provide more than pass/fail information. It must be more than a simple detailing of what occurred. Assessment must provide both the student and the teacher-trainer with specific information concerning what needs to be added, deleted, or changed.

Without well defined and readily available criteria, student learning will be impaired. If competence is not established on the first attempt, remediation, in the form of a well defined critique, needs to be provided. Coupled with this data, suggestions for improvement and perhaps modeling of more precise teaching may be needed.

The task facing the teacher-trainer becomes more difficult. Assessment is not now based on a computer scored sheet. More intense study will not necessarily make the teaching performance more successful. Further, the teacher-trainer is generally presented with a face-to-face assessment. Suddenly, it becomes difficult to treat the failing student as an impersonal number, or face. In order to develop competence the teacher-trainer must have the ability to isolate which variables are present and which are missing. The teacher-trainer becomes a diagnostician, identifying strengths and weaknesses in his students. He becomes a remediator, providing the support necessary to produce competence (Wiersma and Dickson, 1973).⁵

Evaluation in a CBTE curriculum should focus on developing each student's teaching skill. Assessment is not intended to classify students into various levels of competence. Summative evaluation is traditional in teacher education. CBTE programs require formative evaluations (Jones, 1972).³ Each student evaluation should inform the student of strengths and weaknesses. This provides both the teacher-trainer and the student with data on which to base decisions for future learning.

Summary

Competence comes in many forms. While CBTE curricula are being developed nationwide, many are at the lowest level on the competency based continuum. To produce teaching competence will require developing curricula that go beyond learning about reading. Assessing teaching competence can be accomplished but it is by no means simply a matter of placing students in the field. Someone must rigorously define criteria for competence and observe whether that criteria is met. Assessment must be provided and that assessment must be of a formative nature.

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