The Importance of Rigorous Teacher Training

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American teacher-preparation programs face an abysmal situation—out of the 1,200 teaching programs surveyed by the National Council on Teacher Quality, only four stars have earned four stars. Partly because of this, American education has slipped from being ranked with the top nations to being just average (Greenberg, McKee, & Walsh, 2013). Rigorous teacher training is crucial for increasing the prestige of the teaching profession and improving student achievement.

America lags behind in teacher training and experience, which is having a negative effect on its schools. Twenty-five years ago, most working teachers had at 15 years of experience, but now, most teachers have only about one year. American teachers also compare unfavorably with other nations. For example, in countries such as Finland, Singapore, and South Korea, where the level of education has risen, teacher-preparation programs allow admission to just the top third of students, whereas in the United States, the more selective institutions require that the students are just from the top half of the class, and many don’t even enforce this standard (Greenberg, McKee, & Walsh, 2013). According to a McKinsey & Company report, 47% of kindergarten through 12th grade teachers came from the bottom third of their class (Auguste, Kihn, & Miller, 2010). In addition, some teacher-training programs don’t require teachers to complete course work in the area they’ll be teaching. For example, in California, a student who graduated with a business major can then go to one-year post-baccalaureate teacher-preparation program. Such programs give much attention on student teaching, but do little to prepare students for teaching specific subjects, such as reading and math. Furthermore, students in teacher-training programs learn few classroom management and hands-on teaching techniques because these are considered too restrictive and routine for the diverse classrooms that teachers will deal with once they start working. But this leaves newly-trained teachers ill equipped to face the daily challenges in their
classrooms, much like lack of practical surgery training would leave a new physician unable to remove a cancerous tumor. And for low-performing students, the situation is even worse because typically, these are the students who are assigned the newbie teachers while better students are taught by more experienced teachers (Greenberg, McKee, Walsh, 2013).

More rigorous teacher training is needed to increase the prestige of the teaching profession and to attract the best students. In America, the teaching profession is ranked in prestige similarly to the level of nurses and therapists (Tung, 2012). However, many would like to see teachers be as prestigious as doctors, lawyers, and engineers (The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, 2012). One country that enjoys such high regard for the profession is Finland. Sanomat (2004) points out that among Finnish high-school graduates, it is the most admired profession (as cited in Sahlberg, 2010). And although the salaries of Finnish teachers are not high—about $38,500 per year—entrance to Finnish education programs are highly competitive. Thousands of high-school graduates apply to teacher-training programs for primary school teachers, but only 10% are actually accepted to programs. Afterwards, the students undergo rigorous teacher training, which involves first obtaining a bachelor’s degree and then a mandatory master’s degree for all teachers above preschool level. As part of the curriculum, students are required to study education “from several perspectives, including educational psychology and sociology, curriculum theories, assessment, special-needs education, and pedagogical content knowledge in selected subject areas” (Sahlberg, 2010). Finnish education students are also required to conduct and present research—much like American students would be required to do for scientific disciplines. As a result of the rigor, Finnish schools have soared from mediocrity in education in the 1970s to consistently producing most highly-achieving students internationally (Sahlberg, 2010). If American teaching programs...
would model the rigor of Finnish programs, the prestige of becoming a teacher would rise, benefitting American students.

Rigorous teacher training would also improve student achievement. Many people can remember the classes in which they excelled—often, these were the ones where teachers did a great job at managing the class and explaining the material. Such effective teachers are more likely to be produced by programs with added rigor in teacher training. For example, education programs that made arrangements for students in their education programs to collaborate with local school districts later saw an improvement in standardized test scores among K-12 students taught by teachers trained in such professional development programs (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2013). Completing a program that has state approval adds another element of rigor that translates into better student achievement. In North Carolina, for example, teachers who graduated from a state-approved program later saw better academic results from their student than teachers who graduated from other programs. Teacher licensing is another factor that translates into better academic outcomes for students. For example, students of math teachers with licenses did better academically than students of teachers without licenses (NCATE, 2013). Such results are reinforced by other findings comparing teachers with emergency permits—documents allowing those without full teaching preparation—to fully-prepared teachers. The finding shows that “the more emergency permit teachers there are in a school, the lower the school’s achievement” (Goe, 2002). Clearly, more rigorous standards in teacher training would raise the level of education in American schools.

In conclusion, student achievement and prestige of the teaching profession can increase through better teacher training. The wish of many Americans—that teachers are given as much respect as lawyers, doctors, and engineers—can come true through recruiting the brightest
students for the teacher-education programs. To produce top-notch teachers, the programs would have to ensure teachers’ knowledge of subject content and their ability to successfully run a classroom. Through raising the rigor in this way, American students can reclaim their top spot in international rankings.
References


