Analyzing the PBTE Approach

CURRENT efforts to reform teacher education appear to be centered in performance-based teacher education (PBTE). This movement, still in its infancy, is already characterized by controversy. Criticisms of PBTE are varied. Broudy (1) questions its philosophical underpinnings. Some criticize what they believe to be its behavioristic flavor. Others assert that PBTE fails to provide the humanistic orientation so badly needed in a troubled society. Still others view it as a subterfuge to promote the doctrine of accountability—with merit ratings for teachers as the end result.

Yet despite conflicting views about it, PBTE has generated a thrust for change that is unprecedented in the history of teacher education.

The Setting

Prior to the inception of PBTE, the preparation of teachers generally was characterized by programs that were outmoded. Even as recently as the late 1960’s, it appeared that teacher education would remain untouched by the massive curriculum reform movements that were affecting almost every other area of the profession. Despite a growing sense of discontent with teacher education there were no such collective efforts to bring about change. According to Jarolimek (5) even the U.S. Office of Education and the National Science Foundation teacher institutes that were prevalent during this period did little to improve the quality of teacher education programs:

Regrettably these same institute directors and instructors were doing little, if anything, to change their regular campus courses in these subjects, nor were they doing much to change the teacher education programs on their campuses that produced teachers who immediately needed a retraining program to bring them up-to-date.

It is precisely for this reason that USOE inaugurated its nationwide Training of Teacher Trainers Program (TTT) in 1968 (4). Fortunately, toward the close of the decade, certain other developments occurred in response to concerns about education that were to give impetus to the improvement of teacher education. Among these develop-

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ments, three have contributed significantly to the PBTE movement.

In October 1967, the Bureau of Research, U.S. Office of Education, called for proposals for improving the preparation of elementary school teachers. Out of some 80 proposals received by the close of that year, 10 were eventually funded. These proposals became known as the USOE Elementary Models Project. The models shared several characteristics that since have been identified as elements of the performance-based approach.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in its adoption of Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 1970, gave an additional emphasis to the performance-based approach. The criteria adopted in the 1970 standards reflected a strong disposition toward a preparation program that stresses performance. Emphasis on a professional studies component that provides for educational theory with laboratory and clinical experience leaves little doubt that the standards reinforce the conceptual base of the performance-based approach. The fact that NCATE accredits approximately one-third of the teacher education institutions that produce 80 percent of the nation’s teachers suggests that variations on the theme of the PBTE approach will be important for accreditation of these institutions under the 1970 NCATE standards.

On the state level, there is considerable evidence that the PBTE approach to the certification of teachers is gaining momentum. Several states have moved in this direction, among them the state of Washington, which, in its adoption of new guidelines for teacher certification in 1971, approved a document that contains many aspects related to PBTE.

The movement as it affects teacher education institutions already appears to be widespread nationally. Schmieder (6) reported data obtained in responses received from 783 teacher education institutions concerning their degree of involvement in PBTE. Only 228 reported no involvement in the movement.

It appears that developmental efforts thus far comprise a collection of sophisticated PBTE models as well as efforts that are somewhat fragmented. Nevertheless, with a strong emphasis on the national, state, and local levels, support for the movement seems assured for the immediate future.

Experience has shown that a new educational approach lacks credibility unless it is clearly defined. To this end, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education Committee on Performance-Based Teacher Education began its publication series with a monograph designed to clarify the approach (2). The following analysis is based on the AACTE definition.

Implications for Teacher Education

PBTE is based on several assumptions that are considered essential to the approach. The reader should become well acquainted with these since they serve to provide a conceptual framework for teaching, learning, and curriculum.

1. Assumptions About Teaching. One of these assumptions is that the nature of teaching can be ascertained from explicit conceptions of teacher roles and that competencies required for the performance of these roles constitute the bases for judging success, according to specified criteria. But which competencies? Who determines them? What will be accepted as evidence of mastery once agreement on a competency has been reached? Thus, the criterion problem emerges.

Planners must contend with questions such as these, some of which are philosophical, others psychological in origin. Is the teaching process one that should permit the measurement of its outcomes? Or is it a process that ought to produce outcomes that are more widely based, perhaps essentially affective in origin, and thus make the measurement of outcomes a subordinate matter? Or should the process provide for a balance of cognitive and affective outcomes? What is the basic role of the teacher—a transmitter
of knowledge? a facilitator of learning? a diagnostician? an innovator? some of all of these?

Agreement as to what teaching is has eluded educators for many centuries. PBTE offers its definition through the assumption that, essentially, teaching comprises certain behaviors that can be measured. For those who have a philosophical or psychological orientation that runs counter to this assumption, PBTE becomes a controversial subject. In any case, an examination of the substantive question about the nature of teaching should precede the adoption of PBTE as an appropriate program for a teacher education institution.

The current thrust to catalog and disseminate PBTE objectives on a national basis serves a real need, but it does not take the place of a prior examination of the nature of teaching itself on a conceptual level. Objectives are viable only when they fit into a wider frame of reference.

2. Implications for Learning. A second essential element of PBTE specifies that the teacher candidate's rate of progress is determined by demonstrated competency rather than by time or course completion. This requirement can do much to break down the lockstep learning sequence that has characterized teacher education programs for so long.

When time for completion becomes a variable rather than a constant and when the preparatory program is packaged in a format that does not require course completion and credit counting to evaluate success, it is possible to have a continuous progress program for teacher candidates that provides for learning that is individualized and personalized. The author sees many promising possibilities under these conditions, since freedom of choice has been maximized when these conditions have been met.

In this context, however, the AACTE definition states that an implied characteristic of PBTE is modularized instruction. If this is to be the case, then instruction and learning have been restricted to a single format once again. In other words, education courses have been replaced by learning modules. Giles (3) stresses the need to avoid the danger of such occurrences: "...as new patterns develop, it is imperative that teacher education does not become transformed from one historically closed system to another new but equally closed system."

Proponents of modularization insist that it increases possibilities for self-pacing, individualization, personalization, feedback, and other attributes that permit alternative means of instruction. But at the same time, it also restricts the parameters of the learning process to the mastery of the particular objectives on which the module is based. To assume that the entire learning experience should be based on a modular approach denies the teacher candidate an opportunity to explore and to learn in situations that are far more humanistic than modular instruction. To permit the teacher candidate freedom of choice in selecting other modes would enhance the opportunity for the profession to practice what is so often preached about individualizing instruction.

Teacher candidates have different interests and abilities: they approach teacher education with varying cognitive styles. Thus, they should not be restricted to a single mode of instruction. A wide range of human resources should be available, such as seminars, tutorial experience, and even lectures that may not necessarily fall within the scope of a given learning module.

3. Implications for Curriculum. PBTE offers teacher education a golden opportunity to streamline its curriculum. For too long, teacher educators have tried to cover too much. Even worse, sometimes they have ended up by teaching too little about too much. In any case, many programs represent a disjointed array of content and methods with little or no continuity.

The PBTE approach offers much for an improved curriculum, once agreement on appropriate conceptions of teaching and learning has been reached. It can make possible a curriculum that (a) is based on generic competencies that provide for a wide
range of behaviors; (b) has a continuity of learning experiences that provides for the application, critique, refinement, and extension of the basic generic competencies; (c) enables learners to progress at varying rates; and (d) provides multi-type learning modes designed to accommodate a wide range of learner needs and interests.

The PBTE movement has generated a renewed commitment to improve teacher education. It can result in important gains for the profession. If viewed too narrowly, however, as a definitive approach to which teacher education institutions must conform completely, then rigidity, not change, will result.

References


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