

# Overview

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## Understanding the Expert

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Once in awhile a researcher comes up with an idea so intellectually elegant that it commands our attention. An example is the famous "Pygmalion" study (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; see also Rosenthal and Babad 1985) which, despite criticism of its methodology, established the principle that student behavior is greatly affected by teacher expectations. Other examples are Ronald Edmonds' (1979) search for effective schools and Mary Budd Rowe's (see p. 90) insightful discovery of "wait time."

Benjamin Bloom has produced a cornucopia of great ideas—and constructive findings—with his investigations of higher-order thinking, (1974), the modifiability of human characteristics (1964), mastery learning (1978), learning conditions approximating tutoring (1984), and talent development (1985). David Berliner and his colleagues at the Far West Laboratory made a lasting impression with their findings in the well-known Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study (Denham and Lieberman 1980), which made "time on task" a permanent part of our lexicon.

Berliner's current research (p. 4) is not of the scope of that earlier work, and the results may not be as influential, but I would place it with the others for its elegant simplicity and potential power. Berliner wants to find out how expert teachers differ from people with less pedagogical training and experience. At a time when the professional literature is studded with references to master teachers, mentor teachers, career teachers, and lead teachers, it is not unexpected that a researcher should investigate the characteristics of excellent teachers. Berliner's originality is in his reference to a body of literature on experts in other areas: chess players, physicists, air traffic controllers. He reasons that if he can show that expert pedagogues have

qualities similar to those of experts in other fields, we will not only have a better rationale for recognizing their specialness but may be in a better position to set newcomers on the path to greater expertise.

Berliner's findings are tentative at this point, but he is already convinced that the 50-some high school mathematics and science teachers he is currently studying do have characteristics that distinguish them as experts. That probably doesn't surprise you, as it doesn't surprise Berliner, who has always admired great teachers. But it gives added reason for each of us to feel pride in being these experts' professional colleagues.



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