Teachers Who Know Their Stuff—but Can’t Teach It

The drumbeat has been long and steady: public education is troubled by an epidemic of teachers who simply don’t know the content they are charged to teach, especially in low-performing schools.

What the Research Says

In a recent research study, principals in both high- and low-performing schools indicated that instructional knowledge, not content knowledge, was the more frequent cause of teacher ineffectiveness (Torff and Sessions 2005). The most common perceived causes were three components of pedagogical knowledge:

- Classroom-management skills;
- Lesson-implementation skills; and
- Rapport with students.

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These results have implications for policy and practice. By requiring states to demonstrate that teachers have sufficient content knowledge and making no such requirement with respect to pedagogical knowledge, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act does too little to ensure that all classes are taught by a “highly qualified” teacher.

Curt Dudley-Marling, a Boston College education professor, said that NCLB acts “almost to the exclusion of pedagogical knowledge. There is no question that teachers need to be excellent English scholars and to know their subject, but they also have to know how to teach it” (Cavanagh and Manzo 2005).

The results also have implications for state teacher-certification regulations. As a way to increase the supply of teachers, Finn and colleagues have called for teacher certification to be deregulated so that individuals with a bachelor’s degree can obtain a teaching certificate without completing coursework in educational methodology (Kanstoroom and Finn 1999).

By definition, deregulation opens the classroom door to individuals who lack the training in the instructional knowledge that principals judge to be the most difficult threat to teacher quality.

A similar conclusion can be drawn concerning the efficacy of alternative certification programs. These programs require new teachers to meet substantial requirements in content knowledge but negligible ones in pedagogical knowledge and, thus, do little to remedy what’s really ailing schools.

A Change of Focus

Teachers and administrators should focus their energies on exploring techniques that can build the necessary repertoire of pedagogical skills that lead to success in the classroom, such as:

- Teacher-organized and selected study groups;
- Peer observations of colleagues implementing effective lesson plans; and
- …
Master teachers coaching new teachers in specific topics designed to build classroom management.

It goes without saying that content knowledge is essential to teaching competency. But excessive concern about content-knowledge deficiencies has distracted educators and policy-makers from the more difficult teacher-quality problem in public schools. Research shows that ineffective teaching is most often attributable to deficiencies in pedagogical knowledge. Therefore, high-quality teachers not only should know their stuff, they also should be able to teach it.

References

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Here’s Your Chance to Speak Out

The authors cite a study in which principals indicated that instructional knowledge, not content knowledge, was the more frequent cause of teacher ineffectiveness. Do you agree? Which is more important in defining “highly qualified teachers”? Share your thoughts and opinions with other principals by going to www.naesp.org/speakingout.