The Other Role of Schools of Education

by Joseph M. Scandura

One role of a professional school is to integrate, interpret, and disseminate relevant knowledge for practitioners. In medical schools, this function takes the form of training new doctors and of keeping those in the field up to date. In schools of education, the corresponding titles are teacher training and in-service education. A different, but still widely accepted function, is educating those professional personnel who will train practitioners. In education, this might be termed graduate training; in medicine, clinical specialization.

Another equally important role of professional schools is that of research, a role which has been badly neglected by many schools of education. Since knowledge in the behavioral sciences is increasing at an ever expanding rate, and use of this knowledge is perhaps the most promising means of improving our understanding of the educational process, continuance of this neglect is unwarranted. Further, the availability of federal funds, while a mixed blessing, makes some of the practical problems that have existed in the past no longer tenable.

Perhaps history has favored a strong research function in medical schools. Similarly, psychology and education were once "blood brothers" -- why the split? First, it is very discouraging to conduct research and not be rewarded for it -- most of the educational research of that era was inconclusive. Whether it was lack of imagination or use of inadequate tools is not important here, but undoubtedly much was due to the latter. Second, psychology found in behaviorism a means of gaining respectability. In effect, there was little alternative for the psychologists.

Another, perhaps equally important reason that schools of education have neglected research, at least in the subject matter areas, is that too many professional educators were selected largely on their performance as secondary or elementary teachers. No rational person would deny the importance of the skills acquired from such experience. Yet, it is an academic fact of life that anyone who (or any institution which) spends all or even most of his time disseminating information, without having a hand in, or at least close association with the creation of such information, tends to lose interest in what is going on in the fringes of his discipline. As a result both these educators and their students have gotten progressively out of touch.

In medical schools, this difficulty has been largely overcome by having clinical specialists and researchers work in close proximity -- the researcher keeping the clinician in touch with the latest developments and the clinician making the researcher aware of clinical findings in need of further clarification.

Although many educators would agree, in principle, to what has been said, some might argue that educational research is the function of research centers and divisions of educational psychology. Certainly, they perform a valuable function and are helping to plug temporarily an ever widening gap -- but they cannot do the job alone. Providing assistance with the design and statistical phases of an investigation are but a poor substitute for ideas and innovations.

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As a result of these subject matter inadequacies in education and a lack of fruitful methods of research, scholars from the academic departments have become increasingly concerned with educational problems. My own field of mathematics has been one of the prime examples. Since about 1954, mathematicians have suggested far reaching curricular changes. Nonetheless, the original signs of revolution are being supplanted in most quarters by a more thoughtful evolution. The suggested changes inevitably gave rebirth to many developmental and methodological problems. An awareness of such problems has resulted in the increasing use of interdisciplinary teams -- especially in subject matter areas. Typically, these teams have consisted of researchers in one of the subject matter fields, behavioral scientists, and public school teachers. Infrequently, there is a school of education representative. In either case, the educator, although sometimes present in body, and often consulted as a matter of courtesy, is not making or even involved in many of the important decisions.

Armed generally with first rate people and the knowledge, methodologies, and tools that are now available, current work seems far superior to that done previously. Yet, there are some misgivings. Many highly competent educators feel that, in some cases, suggestions have been made which are not feasible, not desirable or both. Thus, mathematicians design a curriculum that is well suited to the research mathematicians without asking whether this is a good thing to do. And, some psychologists, without really appreciating the problems of education, attempt to apply their laboratory findings to educational problems almost indiscriminantly. In other cases educators have been saying the same things for years. But now, someone is paying attention.

A major difficulty of the interdisciplinary approach is poor communication. The educator and psychologist often fail to understand the mathematician and so are unable to intelligently criticize him. Too often, the former go along for fear of appearing "stupid." Similarly, the mathematician typically doesn’t really appreciate all that the psychologist tells him -- after all, "that stuff based on rats has little to do with real thinking." As for the educator, he doesn’t have much of importance to say anyway. Perhaps these are some of the reasons that interdisciplinary teams are often the forerunners of new disciplines.

We need educators, who are research oriented and who are well versed (and who have time to keep up) in related academic areas. For example, how can a person ask and hope to answer basic questions relating to the problems and processes of teaching, learning, and creating mathematics without some understanding of mathematics, psychology, and the educational process? The background necessary for this sort of endeavor is not, I feel, acquired in any of the traditional doctoral programs.

Let me make it clear that I do not believe that all educators should be required to do research. The conscientious clinical educator, in most cases, has too much to do already. The people we describe should have an appreciation of clinical problems, to be sure, but, they also must specifically be trained to do research in some aspect of education. There may be some (few) people who seemingly can do both, but in more cases than not such competence is more apparent than real. At any rate, for the vast majority to try is to rapidly achieve mediocrity in both.

My suggestions for improvement are simple. Let us provide some of our doctoral candidates with the necessary background. Let us provide them with appropriate research experiences during their training, as is done in other disciplines. The dissertation should be the culmination of many research experiences, not an introduction. Only in this way can we hope to decrease the percentage of ill-conceived and ill-executed dissertations that are so prevalent in the field. In some areas most of the academic work should be done within the school of education. In other areas, much, if
not most, of the work might appropriately be done outside of the school of education.

To implement this suggestion, the schools of education and the academic departments must maintain closer ties than previously. Only then will it be possible to train the sort of person we have described. In addition, non-selective graduate admissions policies must become more selective and impossibly large graduate classes must be made smaller. I believe the solution to these problems consists largely of making a sharp distinction between in-service education and graduate training leading to advanced degrees in education -- whether this training is directed towards the clinically oriented person or the researcher.

It also would be helpful to require fewer, but more demanding courses for graduate degrees.

There are many practical and personal problems which might have to be solved before such suggestions can become operational (such as convincing university administrators and state legislators). Yet, these problems must be met. If schools of education continue to ignore (or minimize) their research function much longer, there will no longer be such a function for them to ignore. They will lose a chance of achieving one measure of academic respectability, and the stature which goes with it — a chance they can ill afford to let pass.

TEACHER ASSIGNMENTS IN LARGE GROUP INSTRUCTION

by Stephen S. Winter

Largely because of the impact of the Commission on the Experimental Study of the Utilization of the Staff in the Secondary School, directed by J. Lloyd Trump, many schools have adopted a plan for teaching in which groups of 50 or more students meet regularly for part of their instruction. If the instruction is shared by two or more teachers, this plan is called "team teaching." When a single teacher remains in charge, it is generally referred to as "large group" instruction. Typically, the large groups meet only two or three days a week and alternate with recitation sections of 10 to 20 pupils. Trump has calculated that such a plan allows the teacher more preparation time while maintaining his service to the same number of pupils. Indeed, he suggests that this pattern allows a substantially increased salary for the master teacher in charge of instruction without materially raising the average cost of instruction.

To date there have been no studies confirming Trump's conclusions that large group instruction maintains the service efficiency of conventional instruction. There are a few reports that students achieve well under large group instruction, that the reporting teacher likes it, and that he has additional preparation time available. But we do not know whether the costs have increased in schools with large group instruction, nor whether teachers have been able to keep other assignments from encroaching on the additional preparation time. With these two questions in mind, the author surveyed a sample of Western New York Schools to see what their experience has been.