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Diane Ravitch, Ph.D.—A Brief History of Teacher Professionalism

White House Conference on Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers

Our nation faces a daunting challenge in making sure that we have a sufficient supply of well-educated, well-prepared teachers for our children. There is surely widespread agreement that good teachers are vital to our future. However, there is not widespread agreement about how we accomplish this goal. Some propose that we raise standards for entry into the teaching profession, while others suggest that we lower unnecessary barriers.

The answer in this debate quite clearly lies with an assessment of whether we are talking about the kind of standards that will produce more effective teachers or about the barriers that are simply hoops and hurdles intended to screen people out of the profession who have not taken courses or degrees that have no relationship to being a good teacher.

We know we have some serious problems. But we don't have a widespread certification problem. According to Department of Education data, more than 90% of our teachers have regular certification, and in some regions, it is over 95%. We don't have a problem of teachers lacking degrees. Teachers today have more degrees than ever in our history; the bachelor's degree is ubiquitous, and about half even have a master's degree. We do, however, have a problem in the academic preparation of teachers: only a minority-39%--have a bachelors or graduate degree in ANY academic field. The majority of teachers today have a degree in education, and many have both a B.A. and an M.A. in pedagogy.

At a time when our students are expected to meet high standards in English, mathematics, science, and history, there is a mismatch between teachers' academic preparation and the increasingly rigorous demands of the classroom.

To shed light on these issues, I would like to review briefly the history of the teaching profession and try to identify some critical points.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the requirements for entry into teaching were modest: new teachers had to persuade a local school board of their moral character, and in some districts, pass a test of their general knowledge. In 1834, Pennsylvania became the first state to require future teachers to pass a test of reading, writing, and arithmetic. By 1867, most states required teachers to pass a locally administered test to get a state certificate, which usually included not only the basic skills, but also U.S. history, geography, spelling, and grammar.

During the nineteenth century, different states adopted different approaches to training future teachers. In some, like New York, the state subsidized private academies to prepare teachers for its schools. Massachusetts supported "normal schools" for teacher training, which offered short courses in educational methods, mainly for elementary teachers. In western states, normal schools offered longer courses, both academic and professional, which prepared future teachers and administrators. In rural areas, local school boards ran teacher institutes, where their teachers could brush up on academic and pedagogical subjects. Some large school districts, like New York City, organized their own teacher training programs, led by experienced teachers, well into the 1930s.

Teacher certification in the nineteenth century was irregular and diverse. There was no single pattern, and there was no teaching profession as such.

This changed, however, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The turn of the century was a time in which relatively small departments of pedagogy expanded into undergraduate and graduate schools of education. These institutions developed numerous specializations,

such as school administration, educational psychology, educational sociology, and curriculum. Experts and professionals sought to create an education profession, which had its own preparation programs and its own technical language.

Some of the graduate schools of education got out of the business of teacher training altogether, becoming instead the gatekeepers for the profession's leadership. David Angus, the late professor of history of education at the University of Michigan, wrote an important monograph about this history, titled "Professionalism and the Public Good," which he prepared for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. The creation of graduate schools of education, he said, created a division between the leadership of the profession and classroom teachers. Furthermore, as he and other historians of education have noted, it also contributed to a parting of the ways between professors of pedagogy and liberal arts faculty and the college presidents who had taken a leading role in education reform during the nineteenth century; after about 1915, most school reform activities were led by educationists, and the participation of subject-matter professors and college presidents diminished.

After Teachers College was created in the late nineteenth century, it was often said that 120th street, which separates Teachers College from the rest of Columbia University, is "the widest street in the world." The price of professionalism unfortunately was the split between pedagogy and the traditional disciplines of the liberal arts and sciences.

The new leaders of the profession took charge of teacher certification. Certification became, increasingly, dependent on taking courses in pedagogy and in passing tests of pedagogical theory. State education departments and the colleges of education agreed that longer periods of formal training in pedagogy were required for future professionals of education. Teacher certification eventually came to be identified with the completion of teacher education programs rather than with the receipt of local certificates or the passing of subject-matter examinations. Not all future teachers majored in pedagogy; some continued to major in history, English, mathematics, and science, and to take pedagogical courses as a minor.

Educational leaders wanted education to be recognized as a profession, just as law and medicine were. In law and medicine, there were specialized schools for graduate study; in law and medicine, the profession controlled entry to its ranks, rather than submit to control by uninformed laymen; in law and medicine, there was state regulation of the profession, developed in conjunction with leaders of the profession.

But the analogy between these fields failed because law and medicine had certain qualities that education lacked.

First, both law and medicine have a specific body of knowledge that the future member of the profession is required to learn; this body of knowledge has a significant, common, well-defined core of studies, covering commonly agreed upon knowledge and skills, that would be found in any reputable professional school. There is persuasive evidence that those who have this knowledge are more effective than those who lack it. This was not the case in education, where leading university schools of education committed themselves to an unending campaign for reform, without bothering to establish canons of knowledge about subject matter and about effective practice to guide future teachers.

Second, both law and medicine have well established, research-based standards and procedures. In law, there is a body of case law and commonly accepted procedures that future lawyers must master. In medicine, there are standard tests, standard diagnoses, and standard treatments for known ailments that future doctors must master. This is not the case in education, where pedagogues have debated what to teach, how to teach, how to test, whether to test, and which research methods are acceptable. Because of this lack of consensus on even the most elementary procedures, teachers have received a constant din of conflicting signals from the leaders of the field. In the past, dubious research findings grounded more in ideology than in data were given credibility by pedagogical leaders.

For example, in the early twentieth century, educational researchers agreed that there were immutable laws of learning, but a generation later these "laws" had been forgotten. In the 1920s and 1930s, intelligence testing was all the rage among the nation's education psychologists. In the 1920s, reading researchers advised teachers that children should avoid oral reading, and they advised parents not to read to their children, on the grounds that children were supposed to read with their eyes, not their ears. In the 1930s, reading researchers in schools of education shared a consensus against phonetic instruction, because they believed that children should learn to read whole words, not letters or sounds. This approach led to a debate that burdened reading teachers for the rest of the century. Only now is that debate finally ending, building on

the work of Harvard professor Jeanne Chall in the late 1960s and culminating recently in the studies funded by the National Institutes of Health.

A third difference between law and medicine, on the one hand, and education on the other, is that graduates of law and medical schools have always known that they must pass an external examination in order to be licensed in their field. In education, however, the leaders of education programs sought to eliminate external examinations and to replace them with their own credentials. When the American Council on Education established a National Teachers' Examination in the 1930s, spokesmen from the nation's schools of education vociferously attacked it. The exams tested subject matter mastery. They were offered a few times and seemed to be very popular with urban school districts. Unfortunately, with the outbreak of World War II, there was a severe national teacher shortage; school superintendents hired anyone they could get and lost interest in the Council's external subject-matter examinations. A fourth and perhaps most important difference between education and medicine is that advances in medical sciences have clearly resulted in better health for the American people. Doctors must keep abreast of the latest research so that they can diagnose diseases quickly and accurately, and so that they can advise their patients about how to maintain good health. Whereas medical professionals know that they must keep abreast of the latest medical research, education professionals feel no such need to know the latest education research.

If we learn from history, we will recognize that education cannot become a respected and durable profession until it establishes its practices on a solid foundation of valid research. We must insist on better evidence, more randomized trials, and replicable studies. Education will not achieve the status that it deserves until there is carefully constructed, validated knowledge about how to improve student learning, as well as how to measure student learning. Our universities must dissolve the historic gulf between schools of pedagogy and faculties in the arts and sciences so that those who teach are not only well-trained but truly well-educated.

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