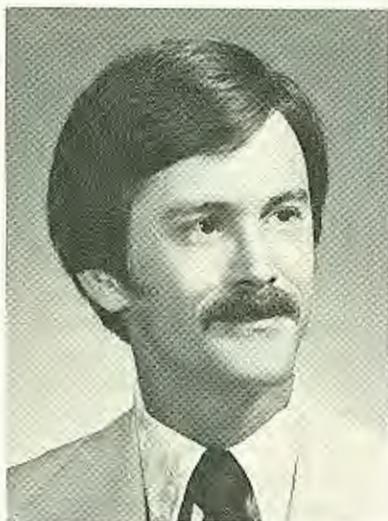


This article discusses the future of Competency-based Teacher Education.

Competency-based Teacher Education in proper perspective

by James Stover Taylor



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Competency-based Teacher Education (CBTE) has become one of the most significant forces in contemporary education. The intent of this article is to discuss critically the past and more importantly, the future development of the movement. CBTE has been receiving tremendous publicity throughout academic circles. It is by no means, however, meeting with universal approval. The critics are legion, and unless further growth in the CBTE movement is tempered with a realistic realignment of thought, their presence will not diminish.

Historically and sociologically, the emergence of CBTE was an attempt to counter some of the inequalities of education. The major thrust was to provide more relevance in the content of instruction. With this laudible goal in mind, professionals began developing and implementing CBTE programs in colleges and universities throughout the country.

As the number of programs rapidly grew, the academic community became more observant and concerned. Many inquiries into the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the movement were met with varied and often discrepant responses. There were many practitioners opposing what was being proposed within the CBTE philosophy. Program developers were implementing tailored approaches which each felt best represented a competency based strategy. This resulted in a wide variability among programs, which in turn blurred attempts to focus on the common underpinnings of competency-based education. Philosophically, then, CBTE cannot easily be defined. While closely allied to the humanistic school, as an educational practice, it draws from both humanism and behaviorism (Taylor, Pound, & Newhouse, 1975).

From the humanistic school of thought, several factors have been incorporated into CBTE. The planning and organization of learning experiences includes active involvement by the student. The student is also afforded alternative modes of learning to insure at least one learning route that each student can use effectively. Teacher/student interaction is also important as a means of facilitating affective development and a positive learning situation (Taylor, Pound, & Newhouse, 1975).

From the behavioristic school of thought, CBTE has also borrowed several important principles. First, the student is provided knowledge of results more quickly than in traditional approaches. Positive reinforcement is intended to stimulate student interest and effort. The emphasis in CBTE is success-oriented, rather than failure-oriented; i.e., the student continues to attempt a unit of study until he/she realizes successful completion. The student is evaluated by a criterion-referencing system which minimizes interpersonal competition. Finally, the teacher's expectations are made explicit to the student through operationally specified behavioral objectives (Taylor, Pound, & Newhouse, 1975).

While this eclectic philosophical and theoretical stance makes CBTE more compatible with psychological data and educational practice, it also fosters confusion among professionals as to what constitutes a well-developed CBTE program. The traditional view that behaviorism and humanism are antithetical is inconsistent with the eclectic philosophy of CBTE. The success that the CBTE movement has experienced thus far is in large part due to the willingness of those involved to draw from both behaviorism and humanism in establishing their programs. This is a laudible beginning. However, the future of CBTE depends upon a more fully defined and explicated theoretical foundation from which research may emerge.

Thus, the logical next step would be to empirically investigate the functional utility of the theoretical constructs which are to be incorporated into CBTE programs. The validity of any theory should be tested through controlled observations before being put into practice. The most recognized and respected defense for any instructional approach is empirical verification. In this sense, practitioners in the CBTE movement have been remiss. Those involved must realize a more focused perspective toward the future. Without a solid theoretical base, little relevant research can be generated in defense of the movement. Professionals who are critical of CBTE recognize this shortcoming. Their demand for evidence to justify the fanfare is not unwarranted. CBTE cannot allow the present paucity of research to be the future demise of the movement.

One major problem CBTE professionals must face is that of specifying the competencies which a teacher should possess. This is likely the most pressing question in teacher education (McDonald, 1974). It seems absurd to develop programs built around a cluster of competencies which may or may not be necessary and sufficient. Only through empirical inquiry can these competencies be identified. The means needed to achieve this end have clearly been stated. McDonald (1975) suggests a number of experimental designs which would be appropriate. Kirk (1972) offers a critique of each of these in his text.

The large sums of money which have been made available from numerous sources have predominantly been directed toward the establishment of additional programs. Without the common denominator of a unified philosophical and theoretical base, these programs will no doubt be quite varied in their perspectives. The future advancement of CBTE depends upon the union of those involved. If research is to make a contribution, funding must be channeled specifically for that purpose.

Potter (1974) suggests field-based inquiry as the preferred research approach. Naturalistic observation would have certain advantages over laboratory inquiry. The investigator would be routinely in contact with the teachers in the field. This would help to ensure effective communication. Also, the transition from the research phase to the establishment of an operational program would be smoother. Many professionals agree that field-based research would be more likely to receive federal support (Potter, 1974; Sobol, 1975; & Sullivan, 1975).

Proponents of CBTE have been overzealous. They have tried to erect the house before the foundation is laid. I would argue that CBTE has vast potential as an effective approach to teacher education. To fully realize that potential, the movement must build upon a firm knowledge base; a foundation painstakingly constructed through the disciplined rigors of empirical research. All enduring progress which has been made in education has been from scaffold to scaffold; that being the proper perspective for the future.

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