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COMMENTARY

Teacher Education Research and Policy

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There is national concern about improving teacher education, but fairly little consensus about how to do that. While some dispute its value, concern is greater regarding how to strengthen it at both preservice and professional development levels. But policy makers need research evidence to do so. Currently, high profile but flawed research drives much discussion. For example, the National Council on Teacher Quality portrays preservice teacher education as mired in mediocrity, with California programs ranked near the bottom. That study, however, was poorly designed, evidence consisting of analysis of documents (such as syllabi and student teaching handbooks) from programs that were not actually visited, and no follow-up on what their graduates do in the classroom.

Teacher education research most likely to influence policy: 1) provides systematic evidence of its classroom impact, particularly on student learning, 2) is of sufficiently large scale to suggest that the impact is not idiosyncratic, and 3) combines methodologies (quantitative and qualitative research), so policymakers can assess its impact in clear terms, as well as "see" how a program might interface with local realities. Although teacher educators produce much research, most has not been designed to influence policy. This was the conclusion of the American Educational Research Association's Panel on Research and Teacher Education in 1995.

I wanted to gauge any increase in teacher education research designed to inform policy. I analyzed all articles (196) published in 2012 in the four leading teacher education journals internationally, looking specifically at research designs used and research questions asked.

Twenty-eight (14%) of the articles did something other than report research, such as discuss an issue conceptually. The remaining 168 articles reported studies that used the following designs: survey research (36%); small qualitative case studies (30%); analysis of documents, videos, or discourse (9%); small-scale experimental or quasi-experimental research (5%); Q-sort (2%); and mixed methods research (3%). Of the mixed-methods studies, only two were large-scale, the design most likely to influence policy-makers. One of them used fifteen linked case studies across England to evaluate a nation-wide professional development program. The other used a quasi-experimental design, plus interviews and classroom observations, to examine the extent to which professional development in culturally responsive pedagogy produced sustained changes in classroom teaching and impacts on New Zealand Maori students. (Occasionally large-scale mixed methods studies have been published elsewhere, but they are few in number.)

Only eleven (6%) of the 196 articles reported studies on the impact of either preservice teacher education or professional development on teachers in the classroom and/or on students. Most reported a positive impact, but would be of limited use to policy makers because of their small scale and limited data. The majority of the rest of the studies examined processes internal to either preservice teacher education (such as role of cooperating teachers) or professional development programs (such as how teachers experience learning communities), or they examined characteristics of teachers (such as teacher resilience).

What might policy-makers do? First, work with teacher education professional organizations to develop a shared agenda of pressing policy questions for California teacher education (preservice and/or inservice) that need research. In absence of dialog,

teacher educators do not necessarily consider policy when designing research, and policy-makers may not necessarily formulate the most powerful questions. Second, offer funding to support needed teacher education research. One reason why so many studies are very small in scale is that researchers are working with limited (or no) research funds. Third, require that research for policy be conducted by teams in which members bring different forms of expertise, including research methodology and racial/ethnic background.

The full study is in Christine Sleeter, Toward Teacher Education Research That Informs Policy, Educational Researcher, April 2014 vol. 43 no. 3 146-153.

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