

What Do Newspaper Editorials Have to Say about Teacher Education Programs?

By **Donna Barnes and Edward F. DeRoche**

The summer issue of *Action in Teacher Education* (1987) focused on the influence of the news media on education. Authors wrote about how the print and electronic media report issues in education including teacher education. Several articles described how news stories often focus on teachers' lack of academic preparation, low teacher morale, the worthless nature of education coursework, and the need to abolish teacher education as a college major. Rhoades and Rhoades (1987) pointed out that one of the most important effects of the news media is the power to set the public agenda and to influence debate on issues. It is through the newspaper editorial pages that editors hope to educate and persuade the public about the issues of the day.

Donna Barnes is an assistant professor of teacher education and Edward F. DeRoche is a professor and dean of the School of Education, University of San Diego, San Diego, California

Purpose

What, then, do editors tell their readers about teacher education/preparation? The purpose of this study was to find out if editors in California's major newspapers write about teacher education/preparation programs and, if they do, what do they say about such programs.

Procedures

Newspapers selected for this study were those published in California with a circulation of over 100,000 during the past five years (1989-1993). The newspaper editorial search included the following sources: *The Sacramento Bee*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The San Diego Union*, *The San Diego Tribune*, *The San Francisco Examiner*, *The Orange County Register*, *The Oakland Tribune*, *The Riverside Press Enterprise*, *The Fresno Bee*, *The Long Beach Press Telegram* and *The Torrance Daily Brief*. To find out which newspapers published editorials on teacher education three databases were used: *NEXIS*, *Datatimes*, and *Editorials on File*.

Findings

The search produced only four editorials that addressed teacher education/preparation. *The Los Angeles Times* (1989) published an editorial titled, "Credential Teachers." *The San Diego Union's* (1990) editorial was titled, "Teaching the Teachers." *The San Francisco Chronicle* (1990) published "A Tyrannical Machine" and *The Sacramento Bee* (1990) titled its editorial "The Failure of the Universities."

An analysis of these editorials is interesting and instructive. *The Los Angeles Times'* editors asked the question: "Architects, electricians, and others are certified to practice their trades, so why not teachers?" They stated that such certification as recommended by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards "would not replace state licensing, which generally ensures only that teachers at least meet minimum qualifications."

The San Diego Union editors were much more critical. "Minimum qualifications" were not their major concern. Their editorial stated that pedagogues had made a mess of teacher training, that education courses were worthless, that states should abolish undergraduate education majors and that "instead of being subjected to mind-numbing educational theory...prospective teachers should be taking substantive courses they can use in the classroom." The editors also called for "placing education professors and students in a clinical setting similar to that in medical schools" and that such a move would "greatly enhance the quality of the nation's teachers."

Editors at *The San Francisco Chronicle* called for the strengthening of the intellectual content of teacher-training programs. They recognized that California was the leader in this area stating that "to enter the teacher training programs in the California State University system, students must first earn a baccalaureate degree."

The Sacramento Bee editors pointed out that "prospective schoolteachers are still being forced to take pointless education courses instead of being required to become broadly educated in the liberal arts, or even in the fields they will teach."

In the analysis of all editorials, a few references were found relating to teacher

training although the editorials focused on other topics. In these editorials, the editors wrote a line or two critical of teacher training programs. For example *The Sacramento Bee* (1991) published an editorial titled “The Opportunity in Chartered Schools—Publically Financed, But Privately Run.” In one of the concluding paragraphs the editors state: “What about teacher qualifications? The answer could be a bachelor’s degree and three months of intensive teacher training—but not the whole nine yards of teacher-college courses required by school bureaucracies.”

Discussion

The data show that editors in California newspapers do not often write much about teacher education/preparation. But when they do, they are not complimentary about the “training” that potential teachers receive. The findings, while not representative of all editors, certainly make it clear that editors find coursework in schools and colleges of education of little value. They seem to believe that a person with a bachelor’s degree can learn to teach on-the-job with an intensive, but short “training” program. It is interesting to note that editors call teacher preparation, “training,” which seems to reflect their attitudes that teacher education is more vocational than educational.

The study also revealed an interesting but expected pattern of editorializing about a particular subject. It seems that when a national media source such as *Time* or *Newsweek* magazines, or when a document is published such as *A Nation At Risk*, or when a noted speaker or public official gives a speech and is interviewed, such events lead to news coverage, feature stories, and possibly editorials. Two examples illustrate this finding. *Newsweek* (1990) published a feature story titled “The Failure of Teacher Ed.” By the end of that week, *The San Diego Union* published their editorial “Teaching the Teachers.” In the other example, Lynne Cheney, Chairperson for the National Endowment of the Humanities, came to California and called for more content and less pedagogy and was critical of the academic preparation that prospective teachers receive in their “training” programs. She was then quoted in *The Sacramento Bee*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *The San Diego Union*.

It is also of interest to note that this study found no person or organization speaking on behalf of current teacher education programs. The Holmes Group was referenced several times in editorials, but always with the caveat that this group was recommending the abolishment of the undergraduate teacher education major. Who does speak to the public for teacher education? Should teacher educators and its organizations begin using the op-ed pages to make their views known and to counter some editors’ negative views about the work we do? In fact, while not part of the study, it appears that op-ed columns were also used by syndicated columnists and educational leaders to “bash” teacher preparation programs.

This was the first study of its kind, and it is appropriate that California newspapers were the sample selected because this state has more newspapers with a circulation over 100,000 than any state in the nation. It is also an interesting state

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to examine editorial views about teacher education because, since the early 1970s, colleges and universities have not been allowed to offer an education major, a fact that does not seem to influence the opinions of the editors. One is tempted to say to the editors that since California teachers have been “liberally trained” for over three decades, they must be among the best teachers in the country.

The results of this study, while limited to California newspapers, have implications for teacher educators and their organizations in other states. There is a need to find out what the media in each state is reporting and editorializing about teacher preparation programs. If the findings are similar to those in this study, then someone or some group needs to provide the public with the other side of the story. It is fair to assume that the public and legislators react to the information they receive through the media and that legislation is thus influenced by views that question the way teachers are educated for their profession.

Finally, the results of this study hold implications for future research on media reporting of teacher education/preparation. Although exploratory in nature, this study does indicate a major public information problem for teacher educators. Future studies need to examine several questions. Why are so few editorials written about such an important topic? How do editors get their information about teacher preparation and how do they form their opinions? What is the impact of editorials on newspaper readers and policymakers? There is a need to study the public information efforts of national and state teacher education organizations to determine the extent to which they influence the media and legislators. This study needs to be replicated in other states to confirm or reject the findings that may be unique to California. Rhoades and Rhoades (1987) remind us that “studies show that issues frequently and prominently covered by the news media are regarded as important by news consumers” (p.40). So, “what do newspaper editors have to say about teacher education programs?” Not very much, but when they do, they view them as worthless, unnecessary, frivolous, light on content, heavy on “how-to,” and structured to keep out the best and brightest students.

References

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