

Issues Affecting the Definition of Developmental Education

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An uninitiated observer of the field could with justification conclude that developmental education suffers from an ongoing identity crisis. Evidence fueling this belief comes from the seeming inability of the field to settle on a name for itself. The term developmental education has attained some longevity. Since its editors renamed the Journal of Remedial and Developmental Education the Journal of Developmental Education in 1976, the field has accepted the latter designation. However, developmental education has been known by many other names during its considerable history prior to 1976. In addition signs point to a current inchoate dissatisfaction with developmental education as a label. There is a need to look behind the labels to contemporary definitions, extensive history, emerging trends, and persistent issues that have implications not only for what the field calls itself, but also for how the field conceptualizes its efforts.

This discussion will (a) examine recent definitions of developmental education as a starting point, (b) briefly review the field's history to illustrate and examine conditions that gave rise to a multiplicity of appellations, (c) look at arguments for renaming the field and factors implicated in calls to do so, and (d) examine in some depth trends and issues with which the discipline will continue to grapple.

Contemporary Definitions

Developmental education typically refers to programs and services designed to meet the needs of underprepared college students. The National Center for Education Statistics (1991) illustrated such a definition when it directed respondents to its survey on developmental education to consider under this term any "program, course, or activity (in the areas of reading, writing, or math) for students lacking those skills necessary to perform college level work at the level required by your institution" (p. 46).

The National Center for Developmental Education (Boylan, Bonham, & Bliss, 1992) used a similar working definition in the Exxon Study, excluding from developmental education the teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) when taught to foreign students.

These definitions echo similar ones by Cross (1976) and Maxwell (1979), both of whom called attention to distinctions between remedial and developmental education. Remedial education, Cross and Maxwell agreed, involved bringing under prepared students, especially those with the weakest preparation, up to the levels of skills required for success at their institutions. However, Cross believed that developmental education was a broader term signifying the goal of talent development for typical students at any given institution. Maxwell maintains, in contrast, that the term developmental education came into use to avoid the stigma of remedial education. Indeed, many states would not fund remedial programs while they would subsidize developmental education (Maxwell, 1979). However, Maxwell pointed out that when waves of underprepared students entered higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, they became the more typical students. The phenomenon of this new majority (Boylan, 1990) blurred the distinction between remedial and developmental education programs; the typical student was often underprepared.

Although remedial and developmental education are sometimes used synonymously, with developmental education preferred as an ameliorative designation, there are many other terms that have been associated with developmental education throughout its history.

The History of Developmental Education

American higher education is characterized by cycles of influx by non traditional students considered underprepared when they first enter until they become a new majority (Boylan, 1990). Within the earliest American colleges, students who did not want to study for the ministry and were not proficient in the Greek and Latin needed as background for such study were the first set of underprepared students (Boylan, 1990).

Following the establishment of land grant colleges just after mid-century in the 1800s to teach agricultural and mechanical courses, the disciplines demanded by the sons of the prospering middle class, colleges established preparatory programs or departments for students weak in reading, writing, and arithmetic (Boylan, 1990; Maxwell, 1979; Tomlinson, 1989; Wyatt, 1992). In 1889, at the height of the preparatory department movement, only 65 of the 400 colleges did not have such programs (Wyatt, 1992). Thus, college preparatory programs and preparatory studies were the earliest labels for developmental education as these types of programs proliferated in the latter half of the 1800s (Tomlinson, 1989; Wyatt, 1992).

Underprepared students continued to be accepted into institutions of higher education as colleges competed for students (Maxwell, 1979). To illustrate, in 1907 at Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Columbia over half the students enrolled did not meet entrance requirements, and these schools established developmental courses (Wyatt, 1992). The situation was not dissimilar at institutions of higher learning around the country, so that by 1941 a survey indicated that college reading courses along with how-to-study courses were widely offered (Wyatt, 1992).

Later two groups exploded into higher education in large numbers, creating surges in the demand for developmental programs and services. The first group was World War 11 veterans, who entered by the millions to take advantage of the generous provisions of the G.I. Bill (Boylan, 1990; Maxwell 1979; Tomlinson, 1989; Wyatt, 1992). The second group was comprised of underprepared students who entered colleges and universities from the 1960s to the 1980s in response to open admissions policies and readily available government funding, particularly for low income students, following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Boylan, 1990; Maxwell, 1979; Tomlinson, 1989; Wyatt, 1992).

The incursions of these new majorities into higher education (Boylan, 1990) led to a proliferation of developmental programs and services. Labels for these programs and services multiplied as well. Chief among them were such terms as preparatory studies, academic support programs, compensatory education, learning assistance, and basic skills. Tomlinson (1989) suggests that it is the controversy associated with remediation at the college level that has in large part led to a multiplicity of labels for the field. The controversy stems from two major beliefs. One is that developmental education has contributed to a lowering of academic standards (Tomlinson, 1989). The other increasingly held belief is that college developmental education programs are too costly to provide when compared to the cost of providing remediation at earlier levels of schooling (Ross & Roe, 1986). The latter view led to the proposal that the 20 campus California State University system abolish remediation (Chandler & Colvin, 1995).

The history of our field provides insights into how, despite a significant role in American education, it has not operated under a single banner. This has no doubt diminished the visibility of the profession. The series of names associated with developmental education, such as preparatory studies, learning assistance, compensatory education, remedial education, and basic skills (Tomlinson, 1989), suggests an identity problem, if not an identity crisis.

Maxwell (1992) argued that developmental educators should consider renaming themselves. Clearer communication to those outside the field was one rationale for the suggested change. Developmental education, perhaps more than most disciplines, has been influenced by trends and issues outside the field.

Defining Developmental Education: An Issues Approach

Developmental education, like any other component of the education field, is not a discrete entity; it does not exist in isolation, and its existence is relative rather than absolute. In many ways, developmental education has been defined by practitioners and administrators from outside those programs designated for the at-risk or underprepared student. English faculty in particular, and generally all writing intensive content areas, in addition to math and science programs, have participated in determining the parameters of developmental course content and the categories of students who would be recommended or mandated into developmental courses. Legislators,

taxpayers, and employers have, by their demands for accountability in education and their increased need for a competent work force, influenced the focus and scope of developmental programs. Indeed, most of the academic, economic, and social issues that have helped define developmental education have evolved, not from within developmental education programs, but from society's expectations of education.

Academic Issues: Access versus Excellence

Americans have historically had high expectations of education, expectations that have frequently been idealistic, at best, and dangerously unrealistic, at worst. Popular schooling has been held accountable, often simultaneously, for saving and destroying America. Cremin (1989) describes the culture of education worship and education's inability to live up to society's expectations "...I would trace the most fundamental and abiding discontent with popular education in the United States to the sense that it is not only an impossible ideal but in the end a hopeless contraction" (p.35). In theory, education as the great equalizer is how society views the democratic ideal of giving a child from the lowest of socioeconomic circumstances access to an education equal to that afforded a child from great wealth; in its romantic ideal, education embodies all that is best in American democracy because it holds the promise of equal opportunity for all who choose to participate. Developmental education is then both the promise that it is never too late to engage in this opportunity for equality and the reminder that all things are not equal in education, just as they are not in society.

The 1990s have found education in the middle of the excellence segment of the access versus excellence cycle. In the access phase of the late 1960s through the 1980s, postsecondary education subscribed to the goal of allowing all students the opportunity to come to college, either through open admissions policies or special admissions categories for underprepared students. At least in part, the rationale for such policies came from developmental psychologists' assertions that individuals learn at different rates and in different ways. If students were academically less successful in kindergarten through high school (K-12) programs than their college bound counterparts, the reason may have been a poor match between developmental readiness or learning style and the language and teaching style in the classroom. Gardner (1983, 1993), Lazear (1993, 1994), and Armstrong (1994) make a strong case for looking beyond the traditional and narrow way in which we define intelligence. For decades, developmental educators have argued informally that many of their students bring to the classroom a certain, often indefinable, savvy about the world and how it works that escapes detection on standard diagnostic and placement tests. In addition, differences in maturity and motivation to learn make some eighteen year olds ready for the independence and pace of learning in college while others, whose academic performance was slowed by immaturity and low motivation, may not be prepared for college courses immediately after high school.

Not to be ignored, but too cumbersome to discuss at length here, are the more global issues that influence our view of developmental education. Some of the rationales for extending access are tied to external factors such as unequal academic opportunity across socioeconomic levels, unequal

funding of K-12 programs, unequal and unfounded academic expectations of students from different racial, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds, and erroneous and inappropriate student placement and tracking based on flawed assessment or other data. If an inaccurate diagnosis and placement occurred early in the educational process, the student may have been advised away from core college preparatory courses and programs that would hone college level reading, writing and mathematics skills. For exploration of those external factors, the following authors provide a starting point: Allington and Walmsley (1995), Bowles and Gintis (1976), Edelsky (1991), Keller, Deneen, and Magallan (1991), Kozol (1991). In spite of the compelling egalitarian, access oriented rationales for open admissions, academic issues, coupled with economic realities and political arguments, forced the cycle from full access to more limited access and reemphasized higher education's commitment to high standards and program excellence.

The Issue of Accountability: Evaluating Program Effectiveness

Research into the effectiveness of developmental programs for college students has been sporadic, typically underfunded, and often inconclusive: Many factors have hindered research into the effects of developmental classes, study skills courses, tutorials, and counseling programs on the performance of underprepared college students. Most of these problems stem from scarce research funding and from the diversity in the programs themselves. Significant research efforts that came from credible entities such as the National Association for Remedial /Developmental Studies in Post-Secondary Education (Boylan, 1983) and The National Center for Developmental Education in conjunction with the Exxon Education Foundation (Boylan, Bonham, & Bliss 1992) are evidence of the interest and value that developmental education has assigned the role of research.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the baby boom wave of underprepared students came to college, significant amounts of money were allocated for delivery of basic skills programs. However, in the rush to take services to the most needy students, research and program evaluation were assigned a low priority. As services expanded and programs developed, meager funds were allocated to research and evaluate developmental education programs. Early studies (Astin, 1975, 1977; Boylan, 1978; Cross, 1976; Maxwell, 1979; Roueche, 1968; Roueche & Kirk, 1974) contributed much needed feedback to program administrators, but developmental programs tend to be as diverse and heterogeneous in nature and scope as the student population that they serve, making them difficult subjects for standard research methodology.

Traditional research in K-12 education has enjoyed the benefit of distinct content disciplines with well funded and professionally developed assessment and clear curricular goals. Developmental programs have no uniform residence. For example, basic writing may be housed with the English Department or in a separate developmental division or in tutorial or computer assisted laboratories, making the tasks of comparison and replication more complicated for researchers intending to conduct large scale studies. The lack of program mandated standardization, perpetuated by a general hands-off policy on the part of state higher education accreditation entities, may have allowed developmental education programs to be attentive to the needs of the student population they serve but extremely difficult as the subject of research efforts. Contrast the evaluation of the eclectic range of developmental programs to the much simpler task of evaluating the effectiveness

of a standard third grade language arts curriculum for a relatively homogeneous population of nine year olds who have previously completed similarly standardized first and second grade language arts curricula.

Early research efforts in developmental education met resistance from colleagues in science and social science research because much of the research was descriptive and qualitative in nature. It lacked rigor. It was often action research carried out in teachers' own classrooms, and it lacked the objectivity and control that had become standard in behavioral research projects. Furthermore, it was often unfunded and undocumented, but it was a beginning.

Researchers in the current excellence phase of the access-excellence cycle, when education dollars are scant and legislators and taxpayers want evidence that expensive programs work, must learn to evaluate student outcomes in ways that make sense to voters but also give a clearer view to educators. Research can answer questions, at least in a formative sense, about the effectiveness of open admission policies, conditional or probationary admission policies, mandated basic skills assessment and subsequent remediation, transferability of study skills from generic to content-specific application, and counseling for personal organization or motivation or stress relief or dozens of other topics. In addition to student-centered and curricular studies, researchers need to explore optimal ways to train professionals to teach and administer programs for at-risk students.

Economic Issues: How Much Will It Cost?

Ask state legislators and college administrators. Ask the parents of college students. Ask college students themselves. A college degree is an expensive commodity. Kroe (1992), in a National Center for Education study, estimated the typical tuition, fees, room and board charges for the 1991-92 academic year at \$4900 for four-year and two-year institutions. When students face mandatory basic skills assessment and subsequent developmental requirements, the time and financial resources allocated for a degree increases. For states like Arkansas, Georgia, Texas, Florida, and New Jersey, that require assessment and placement in whatever subject or skill the assessment indicates, students must postpone core curriculum courses such as English composition and required mathematics courses until they can successfully complete required developmental prerequisites and retest. Generally, developmental courses count for institutional credit in the freshman year toward residency, for enrolled hours for financial aid and extracurricular requirements, and for sports eligibility, but they typically do not count toward graduation. Usually students must pay regular tuition rates for these developmental, non-graduation credit courses, which adds to the total price of a degree.

No firm estimate of the cost of developmental education to state and local budgets seems to exist; Abraham (1992) cites a state cost range from \$2 or \$3 million up to \$10 million. Taxpayers and their elected representatives may or may not be aware of the cost of developmental education courses to the state, but informed voices from the policy sector, such as Tucker (1991), president of the National Center on Education and the Economy, have begun to call for taking ... the money we now spend on the high-cost, low-efficiency segment of our "postsecondary high-school" system and use it in the schools to do the job right the first time. Why not ask colleges to join in helping the

schools to educate everyone -especially our poor and minority students- to a real college-entrance standard? (p. A36)

The more academically diverse the student population, the greater the cost of meeting the needs of all students. For colleges, the bottom line is that by admitting students who do not meet college level academic standards and charging them full tuition and fees, the only ethical solution is to offer assistance commensurate with student need. Clearly this need will vary by institution; the community college with an open admission policy must address a greater need than the four year college with selective admission requirements. The greater the student or institutional need, the greater the proportional expense for developmental programs.

Education as the Cure for Society's Ills

If postsecondary education offers students the most certain route to secure careers and lucrative salaries for individuals and economic prosperity for our national economy, a proposition voiced at various times by educators as well as the public and private sector employers and government officials, education would be expected to take on the role of solving all problems. Cremin (1989) argues that attempting to solve all of America's ills, especially economic competitiveness, is a dangerous plan. After the 1957 education frenzy over the former Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik, Americans looked to education as the quick fix solution to our relatively slow start in space exploration. For the economic woes of the 1990s, education is again being tapped as the proper weapon to bring the economy back to competitive standing. If there is a link between level of literacy, education, and training and a nation's economic well being, and if the nation expects education to provide this competitive edge, higher education will need to continue to lure the current 50% plus of our population into postsecondary programs, and it will need to find a way to keep them in those programs through graduation. That is a daunting prospect for developmental educators if the retention and graduation rates of at-risk students fall well below the national average. If the mean college dropout rate is in the 66% to 75% range (Tucker, 1991), higher drop out rates for developmental students will be significant cause for even the strongest proponents of education to question the economic value of open admissions policies and the developmental programs that accommodate at-risk students.

Shor (1992), in exploring the rationale for promoting education as the path to economic prosperity, argues that educators must guard against the negative side of viewing education as the answer to America's economic woes. In response to America 2000, Shor quotes the Department of Education publication:

eight years after the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared us a "Nation at Risk," we haven't turned things around in education. Almost all our education trend lines are flat. Our country is idling its engines, not knowing enough or being able to do enough to make America all that it should be (p. 9). Shor (1992) warns that education will continue to be blamed for low-literacy, low-skilled workers, and ultimately for America's economic decline, when in fact "blaming poor education and allegedly undereducated workers for unemployment and the economic crisis are old themes of the restoration period, which serve to distract attention from the ruinous economic

policies pursued by business and government..." (p. 233). Educators who work with at-risk students must shudder when they reread some of the America 2000 goals: a 90% high school graduation rate, competency in five core subjects (as measured by whom, we ask?), and first in the world in science and mathematics. Unfortunately, all of this is to be accomplished after significant budget cuts at the national level for programs aimed at equalizing the unequal funding of public K-12 education. When education fails to deliver the 90% graduation rate, and the first prize in science and math, and the core subjects competency, because those hard to reach students drag down the national average, educators, especially those who work with academically disadvantaged students-will be a handy scapegoat for the economic woes of the year 2000.

Social Issues: Education Stretched Too Thin

American education, especially K-12, has nominally borne the responsibility for transforming students from tremendously diverse backgrounds and cultures into patriotic, law-abiding citizens. Horace Mann (1845) and John Dewey (1916) viewed education as the place to address social differences among a heterogeneous student population. In the postsecondary institutions of the 1940s and 1950s, Conant (1953) saw the perfect setting for training the nation's leaders, as well as protecting academe from dilution. The 1960s and 1970s brought postsecondary access to levels never before experienced in this country, and the goal of the most vocal of those students was reform. Education became the empowerer of the oppressed and the vehicle to correct social ills; segregation, discrimination, poverty, and illiteracy stood no chance in the face of an educated nation.

But, in the beginning of the access phase and before the Great Society programs aimed at eliminating poverty and illiteracy, experienced educators saw flaws in the plan; education was to be stretched to meet new demands from government and taxpayers. Jencks (1964) was skeptical of burdening education with affecting social reform (and economic reform) without initiating significant redistribution of income; his recommendation was to use social programs rather than education to enact social change. Jencks (1972) saw flaws in expecting education to equalize opportunity for students whose lives outside of school reflected anything but equal opportunity because school could offer too little contact and it would come too late to equalize participation in economic and social stability.

More recent voices have called for systemic changes that may, over time, have an impact on what education can contribute to social reform. Shor (1992) calls for what he terms an "opposition agenda" to address social issues. Generally this involves teaching students to question authority, to have high expectations, to expose and oppose inequalities, and to spend the money on social programs and education that is currently being spent on the military. A sample of his reform plans for postsecondary education includes unrestricted open admission, free tuition, affirmative action in admission and hiring, increases in teacher pay, and free access to all books, materials and ideas. The 1994 elections and the conservative reform document that is sweeping the Republican-dominated House of Representatives make these proposals, or any proposals friendly to programs for at-risk students, less likely to be realized in the near future.

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