

1 Teacher Education at the Turn of the Century

Teacher education is under attack. There is no shortage of accounts of what is wrong with teaching, teachers, and teacher education in the media or even the display windows of popular bookstores. Education deans across the country are scrambling to mount challenges to new state regulations intended to curtail the role of education schools in the preparation of new and experienced teachers. In a number of states, schools of education have been informed that their state accreditation is in jeopardy if sufficient numbers of teachers do not pass licensure exams. And eligibility for federal grants related to teaching and teacher education will soon be linked to state “report cards” that aggregate the test scores of would-be teachers by teacher preparation institution and thus produce a passing or failing “grade” for each institution and state.

As we enter the 21st century, then, the future of teacher education is at best uncertain. The standards movement now dominates discussions about teaching and learning, curriculum, and assessment, as well as all aspects of teacher learning, teacher assessment, and teacher certification. There are also unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) questions about what it means to educate teachers for “the public good” in the face of the increasing privatization of American education through private schools, charter schools, for-profit school corporations, and now even for-profit teacher education programs. Prompted by changes in the standards of accrediting

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agencies, teacher-education institutions nationwide are shifting from input- to output-based programs and struggling with questions about what it means to provide empirical evidence that teacher education is a “value-added” endeavor that can be linked to both student learning and school change.

The teacher education profession finds itself responding to the charges against it as well as the complex demands placed upon it. Increasingly, there are competing positions in the discourse, and there is no clear consensus about what teachers need to know, who should provide education for teachers, how teachers should be certified and licensed, and what role university-based teacher preparation should play in school improvement. Lack of consensus is not new. Critique and criticism from many different perspectives are healthy as long as they are done with integrity and as long as all parties are responsible with their rhetoric and their claims.

This special issue of *JTE* contains a rich collection of articles on teacher education at the turn of the century. Authored by some of the leaders in the field and by people who are differently positioned from one another, these articles debate and offer rational (and in many cases, much needed) critique of important issues in the future of teacher education. Despite their different approaches and perspectives, the articles in this collection begin with the premise that the teacher-education enterprise is (or can be) valuable, and that we need to enhance the professionalization of teachers to preserve public education and broad participation in a democratic society.

There is, of course, another debate about teacher education that is more publicized and politicized than debates that are related in some way to the professionalization of teaching and teacher education. Although occurring simultaneously, this other debate is played out more in the election rhetoric of politicians than in the discourse of teacher educators, more in the pages of local newspapers than in the journals related to teacher education, and more in the sound bytes of television coverage than in the symposia of professional conferences. This deeply politicized debate confounds and sometimes overrides differences in the ways that major questions about professional knowledge and practice, language and cultural differences, and professional learning contexts are being framed within the educational community. Politically motivated solutions to the supposed state of affairs sometimes supersede grounded positions on the practices of teacher education. With a few notable exceptions (particularly Linda

Darling-Hammond, David Berliner, and others inside the teacher-education community such as Jeannie Oakes, Lee Shulman, and Art Wise, whose focus includes policy issues), many of us in teacher education have been conspicuous as much by our absence from the political debate as by our occasional participation in it.

This is unfortunate but not so surprising. Political debates are very unlike the more deliberate, carefully sequenced, and admittedly equivocal arguments of academics. At their extremes, the political debates are broad-brushed and simplistic, fueled by well-organized national and state-level conservative initiatives committed not to the critique and improvement of teacher education but to dismantling it completely (e.g., Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 1997; Kanstoroom & Finn, 1999; Stotsky, 1999). Many of those inside the educational community find the political debate anti-intellectual and not grounded in the knowledge base on teaching and learning, intended as much to provoke as to illuminate. One recent commentator, for example, declares that the teacher education curriculum has changed over the years primarily through the addition of a "heavy dose" of multiculturalism that is more "touchy-feely self-awareness" (Schrag, 1999, p. 32) than anything else. Another claims that teacher educators have virtually emptied the pages of elementary school reading materials of their white middle class characters and instead inserted easier texts about minority characters, which has caused a decrease in children's reading and thinking abilities (Stotsky, 1999). Still another (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 1997) denigrates teacher educators for their commitment to public education as an "almost sacred democratic institution" (p. 24) and concludes that this commitment is fundamentally out of touch with the views of "the public," whose priorities are discipline, basic skills, and good behavior.

Commentaries like these from the Public Agenda and the conservative Fordham Foundation are often interlinked with one another in ways that are not immediately apparent. The authors support their claims with pseudo research, rumor, and innuendo that virtually ignore historical and demographic facts and/or rely on extraordinarily suspect methods of data collection and analysis. They claim nonpartisanship and neutrality of purpose when their critiques are in actuality rooted in a deeply political conservative agenda for the privatization of American education and for a return to a mythological American past when all students were educated to high standards and shared the same values.

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At the extreme, conservative groups like these begin with the premise that we need to dismantle teacher education institutions completely and break up the monopoly that schools of education have too long enjoyed. Not surprisingly, they support alternative routes to certification that circumvent almost completely schools and colleges of teacher education. Their construction of the complex questions related to teacher knowledge and teacher learning is deceptively simple: What teachers need to know is subject matter, which they gain exclusively outside of schools of education. Everything else can be picked up on the job. This dismisses the whole knowledge base on teaching and learning.

For better or worse (and many of us inside teacher education would say, worse, much worse), the most conservative voices are those being heard the loudest and clearest in the media and in the state houses of this nation. As offensive as this kind of commentary might be to many of us, it does exist and it does—to a degree greater than most of us in teacher education would like to admit—shape the debate and chart the course of policy in teacher education.

Teaching and teacher education are unavoidably political enterprises and are, in that sense, value-laden and socially constructed. Over time, they both influence and are influenced by the histories, economies, and cultures of the societies in which they exist, particularly by competing views of the purposes of schools and schooling. Like it or not, more of us in teacher education and in the educational research and policy communities will need to engage in these public and political debates if we are to have a real voice in framing the questions that matter for the future of teacher education. It may well be that the future of teacher education depends as much on how we critique and enhance the professionalization of teaching within the educational community as it does on how we engage in the public debate about privatization, regulation, and deregulation.

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