Bridging the Disconnect between Policy and Practice in Teacher Education

By Carol A. Bartell

For too long, we have ignored the vital connection between policy and practice in teacher education. We have wrapped ourselves in the mantle of academic freedom and professional autonomy, feeling that we are "above politics." We "study" policy rather than seek to influence its direction and practice. The policy world has seemed too distant, too complex, too fragmented, and often unapproachable. Yet the policy world influences and shapes the world of practice in vital ways. To ignore it is to do so at our own peril and to render ourselves irrelevant and obsolete.

Teacher education has seldom received as much policy attention as it does at present. Virtually every state has given significant attention to: (1) standards for teachers; (2) assessment strategies for measuring teacher success; (3) more accountability for preparation programs; (4) alternative routes to earning credentials; and (5) incentives to encourage more persons to enter and remain in teaching. Each of these reform areas has implications for what we do. Even the federal government has expanded its reach by enacting Title II of the Higher Education Act (HEA), authorizing new federal grant programs that "support the efforts of states, institutions of higher education, and their school district partners to improve the recruitment, preparation, and support of new teachers" (U.S. Department of Education, p. 1).

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This new initiative includes accountability measures in the form of reporting requirements for institutions and states on teacher preparation programs and licensing requirements.

In part, these efforts have been fueled by state and national reports that have focused renewed attention on the importance of teaching. Darling-Hammond (2000), in summarizing a large body of research evidence, has demonstrated that what we do matters in terms of student achievement. Well-educated teachers have more to offer to their own students than those who are not fully educated in content and pedagogy. As compelling as the evidence is, we seem to have difficulty convincing those making policy decisions about the importance and relevance of what we do. We are too often perceived as out-of touch and out-of date with current practices and resistant to change. Teacher education is a ready target for reform efforts, often aimed at producing a more regulatory environment, more accountability measures, and more alternatives to traditional teacher education.

Fragmented Reform Efforts

Most of the reform agendas call for "systemic reform," requiring the forging of largely unprecedented consensus around learning outcomes, purposeful coordination by independent agencies and policy bodies within and across levels of the system, the implementation of multiple, aligned policy interventions, and a rethinking of traditional governance patterns. However, many would argue that these strategies are impossible in a system deliberately designed to maximize variation and frustrate purposeful coordination (Cohen & Spillane, 1993).

Cohen and Spillane (1993) point out that "the decentralized organization of American education rendered the connections between policy and instruction inconsequential for most of our history.... Similarly, American disdain for intellectually challenging education has left us with only modest evidence on how such education might turn out in this nation's schools" (p. 37). As a result, "our ingeniously fragmented political system is evident even in efforts to cure fragmentation" (p. 61). Every decision-making body thinks it should be the one to bring coherence to the system, which only increases fragmentation.

Fuhrman (1993) argues that three other characteristics of the political system contribute to incoherent policymaking: the focus on elections, policy overload, and specialization. The emphasis placed on campaigning and elections over policy or institutional improvement goals has led legislators at the state, as well as federal, level to seek legislation with "name recognition," to circumvent controversial issues, and to favor policies with immediate effects and clear benefits over those with longer term and more remote benefits. At the same time, state leaders are sponsoring iniatives on many more important education issues than in the past, inducing them to pay less attention to each aspect of policy. With increased complexity comes specialization in the legislative process. Specialization creates more arenas in which politicians can

claim credit, but specialization also contributes to the fragmentation of the system. Term limits in California only exacerbate the problem, giving legislators a shorter time frame in which to become an expert and "make their mark."

Others are concerned about the dangers of regulatory, centralized state control that they see as inherent in the systemic reform movement. Clune argues that the challenge in systemic reform is to "design policies that combine the high standards of systemic policy with a broad diversity of curricular options and a powerful delivery system" (1993, p. 234).

Sindelar and Rosenberg (2000) make the case that teacher educators are caught in a world of ill-conceived and contradictory policies and practices. They write:

> Teacher education is servant to many masters, both within and without the academy. Programs must address state certification standards and licensure requirements of professional organizations, as well as fulfill both state and professional accreditation standards. Program content is political putty, ready to be shaped by decision makers in response to hot-button issues. (p.189)

Teacher educators, then, are left to find their way in a changing and uncertain environment. They do so from a position of relatively low status and insufficient funding in their own institutions (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Goodlad, et al, 1990; NCTAF, 1996; Zimpher & Sherrill, 1996), further complicating the struggle for a new identity both within their own higher education communities and the professional worlds they intend to serve. Academic and institutional policies guiding higher education decisions "delimit the manner in which teacher education can be conducted" (Sindelar & Rosenberg, 2000, p. 189) and often serve to discourage the very reform initiatives adopted by the state or advocated by the profession itself.

This is not a new or a recent challenge, but has become ever more urgent. How then should we respond to these challenges? Many have urged a more activist role for teacher educators both as individuals and in collective ways. Our voice will not be heard unless we engage in the dialogue. As Cohran-Smith points out:

> Teaching and teacher education are unavoidably political enterprises and are, in that sense, value-laden and socially constructed.... 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 education. (2000, p. 165)

Teacher Education in the Academic Context

Before we begin to think about how to influence the policymakers on issues that impact teacher education, we ought to look carefully at our own institutional context. The practice of teacher education is shaped in significant ways at the individual institutional level. We need to better communicate our message at home and work to shape practices that advance rather than inhibit our ability to do our work well.

The academy has rested for too long on its monopoly of teacher preparation. Teacher education produces a steady stream of students and, as many have pointed out, an all too often convenient source of funding for more prestigious programs and activities on campus (NCTAF, 1996; Zimpher & Sherrill, 1996). Public perception and mistrust may in part be influenced by the university context in which teacher education occurs. If the university does not value and support its own faculty and programs the public is less likely to do so.

As Frazier (1998) has noted, universities that prepare teachers "host a program having a very specific and profound purpose" (p. 138). Millnick and Pullen (2000) state:

> Teacher education requires explicit institutional commitments to a special set of demands that go beyond the ordinary norms of academic life. Clearly, colleges need to reassess their commitments to the education of teachers and have the courage to dramatically restructure underperforming programs or to close them if they are unable to make the changes needed to ensure teacher quality. (p. 273)

New demands for a larger quantity of teachers has come at the same time that we are asked to produce a cadre of more highly qualified teachers who are more attuned to the needs of today's schools. These seemingly contradictory demands have encouraged policymakers to turn to a variety of alternatives. Teacher education is increasingly taking place outside of the academy and, even within the academic context, has been shaped and reshaped by alternative delivery models and an expanding number of delivery providers. Alternatives have arisen not only to produce larger numbers of teachers, but, in many cases, teachers who are often viewed as having more relevant, "useful" skills.

This utilitarian, credentialist notion of teacher education corresponds to the increasing trend toward anti-intellectualism in our society (Hofstadter, 1996). If teachers are to merely be "trained" in requisite skills and practices in apprenticeships, then teacher education can very well take place outside of the academic arena. However, as Darling-Hammond argues compellingly in her paper presented to California university presidents (1999), thirty years of research demonstrates that both a thorough knowledge of subject matter learning and a deep understanding of teaching and learning make a difference in schools. Policies that tend to short cut this learning process merely to produce a ready workforce tend to cheat our children and do a disservice to our schools.

When fifty California College and University Presidents met at Stanford University in December of 1999 for an historic "Teacher Education Summit," it signaled a readiness to consider the all-institution responsibility for reclaiming and reaffirming our commitments to teacher education. The joint statement coming from that meeting is noteworthy:

> Recognizing that teacher preparation is a complex and long-term task, and accepting our responsibilities as university and college leaders, we invite a broader conversation

with all of the stakeholders in California education, including the schools, policymakers, superintendents, teacher organizations, and school boards. (James Irvine Foundation, p.7)

Next Steps at Home

Teacher educators need to seize the opportunity for providing leadership in initiating this conversation on our own campuses and in our local communities. The conversations should be held outside of our own teacher education circles and should include: (a) faculty in the arts and sciences with responsibility for subject matter preparation, (b) academic committees, (c) academic administrators, and (d) university advisory groups and governing bodies.

The discussion might center on such topics as:

- Who should be admitted to teacher education programs?
- How should candidates be prepared?
- How will they be supported?
- How should their progress be assessed?
- How shall the teacher education faculty role be defined to achieve these broader purposes?

University policies regarding admission standards, calendars, advising practices, workload allocations, promotion and tenure requirements, program and course adoption practices, and so forth, can serve to foster or constrain successful practices in teacher education. These policies need to be examined and changed, if necessary, to support our work in better ways.

As teacher educators we will need to enhance our own image and reputation in the university and in the K-12 school community. We need to hold ourselves and our students to high expectations. The academy values research, and we can do credible research that lends to our understanding of effective teaching and learning practices. Higher education, in general, seems more interested in fostering "active learning" and "critical thinking" for students in all university classrooms. Here is a place for us to make a contribution to the wider higher education community, since these are values we have long held and can communicate to others.

We need to be in thoughtful conversation with our K-12 partners. We need to attend the same professional meetings and discuss the same issues and concerns. We can be informed by their struggles and problems of practice and contribute another perspective. We can invite local educators to speak to our classes and have our graduates return to campus and interact with our students about their experiences, their struggles, their joys, and their discoveries.

We also need to highlight what we do particularly well. Public presentations,

newsletters, workshops, staff development presentations, and use of the local media are all vehicles for getting out the word about our programs.

Who Influences Teacher Education Policy in the Broader Arena?

If the voice of teacher educators is to be heard in the wider policy arena, it must be communicated in ways that advance our cause and enhance our professional endeavors. We also need to know where, when, and to whom we need to communicate our message. Knowing the "players" in the policy arena beyond our own campuses and understanding the manner in which the decision-making occurs are first important steps.

Who are the players in this fragmented policy system and how do they exert influence on policy for teacher education? There is no easy answer to this question. Many interests are at stake in American system of public education and these interests are often in conflict with one another. Spring (1998) points out that these interests become the underpinning of the politics of education and involve a complex interrelationship between politicians, private foundations and think tanks, teachers' unions, special interest groups, educational politicians, school administrators, boards of education, courts and the knowledge (publishing and testing) industry.

Others have attempted to describe the decision-making by looking at who has the most power to effect or influence change. From a review of education policy-making in six states, Marshall, Mitchell, and Wirt (1986) established the following list those who influence policy in descending order of influence:

1. Members of the state legislature specializing in education issues;
2. Legislature as a whole;
3. Chief state school officer and senior state officials in state departments of education
4. Coalitions of educational interest groups (teachers; administrators; school boards; and other educational groups);
5. Teachers' associations;
6. Governor and executive staff;
7. Legislative staff;
8. State board of education;
9. School board associations;
10. Associations of school administrators;
11. Courts;
12. Federal policy mandates;
13. Noneducation interest groups (business leaders, taxpayers groups);
14. Lay groups (PTA, school advisory groups);
15. Educational research organizations;
16. Referenda; and
17. Producers of educational materials.

It should be noted that the order of importance on this ranked list may vary from state to state and may have changed slightly since 1986. In fact, given the increased

role and importance of education as an election issue, a study conducted today might yield a higher ranking for the governor.

Absent from this rather eclectic list of elected and appointed officials, professional organizations, regulatory agencies, community groups, and what Spring (1998) calls the "knowledge industry" are those in the academy. Because we are not seen as "players," it would be extremely rare for a state legislator to inquire at any point in the legislative adoption process, "And how do the universities (or, more specifically, teacher educators) stand on this issue?" Policymakers do not seek our opinion because they have come to believe that we are a part of a system that needs to be "fixed" rather than key contributors to the reform agenda. In fact, many of the accountability measures being adopted appear to stem from a mistrust of what we do and how well we accomplish the goals that have been established for us.

Some have advocated that we, as a group, become active in legislative advocacy. The California Council on the Education of Teachers has taken some initial steps in this direction, taking positions as an organization on proposed legislation. It is a start, but it is not enough. An organizational position is in itself rather pointless if the legislator does not recognize nor value the opinion of the particular organization taking the position. Particularly if the position is viewed as self-interested, it is a position that is easily disregarded or dismissed.

Legislative advocacy is one strategy in what ought to be a multi-pronged, intentional effort to enter into the dialogue and impact the direction of reform efforts for teacher education.

Informing Those Who Influence

How then do we exert influence? Where are the leverage points and how to we use them effectively? Because we are not currently in a position of influence, we need to work through those who do have influence, either by virtue of their elected position, their access, or their perceived status in the policy world.

Teacher educators can individually and collectively become advocates for education policy. We can be advocates at home in our own institutions and in our communities, as well as at the state and national levels.

Because of the increased importance of the legislative process to teacher education, we need to each become advocates for our programs and our point of view with our legislators and their staff members. Some suggested approaches are listed below:

- Get to know your assembly member and senator. Familiarize legislators and their staffs with you, your university and your program. Keep them informed about innovative programs and invite them to see the program in action. Invite them to special events on your campus and involve them when appropriate.

u Prepare position papers on education issues of concern. Become a provider of information that can be used in supporting positions that are seen as reform minded.

u Testify at hearings or send written statements, especially if your legislator is on the committee holding the hearing. Send letters and make phone calls on specific issues to your legislator. Briefly indicate your support or opposition to a bill and state the reasons why.

u Volunteer to work on campaigns or serve on their advisory committee on education. Get on the legislator's mailing list. Suggest other colleagues to be included. Organize group functions featuring your legislators, such as banquets, legislative breakfasts, receptions.

u Establish and participate in a legislative network for educators in your region to provide rapid communication and action on "hot" legislative issues.

u Keep informed about education legislation. Know which members are on the education committees in the Assembly and in the Senate. Follow education legislation on-line at <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/bilinfo.html/>.

u Work through the professional organizations (CCET as well as others) of which you are a part to influence policy. Volunteer to be on the legislative or policy committee. Look to other organizations to build coalitions.

We need to seize the opportunity for leadership following the Presidential summit. The follow up plans to the summit call for:

u A coalition linchpin to continue the collective work of the summit;

u Regional consortia to identify local teacher preparation needs;

u Research to improve teacher education policy and practice; and

u Outreach to a broader community.

Teacher educators need to be actively engaged in framing this agenda, providing input to the dialogue and discussion, conducting the research, and taking positive, proactive steps to reach out to all stakeholders.

Conclusions

As we begin a new century with a renewed emphasis on teaching and teacher preparation, we can no longer afford to ignore the political context in which our work occurs. Policy and practice come together in important ways in our own every day life. We have to become advocates for our own field of endeavor at home and in the broader political arena.

Just as everyone has become an expert on schooling because they once attended school, many now feel that they possess expertise about how teachers should perform, and by extension, how they ought to be prepared. We need to be clear and thoughtful in our work, but we also need to be able to articulate what it is we do and why we do it. We are now every bit as accountable to our publics as the teachers we prepare.

We need to be more vigilant in the politics of own higher education institutions and in the state policy arena. We need to enlist the support of our school communities and professional organizations. We need to be part of the "knowledge industry" that informs opinion makers and leaders about the nature of teaching and learning. We need to be seen as speaking with one voice rather than in a disconnected, fragmented, and often contradictory ways.

Passivity in the political process will no longer do. Our very future depends upon our active participation in arenas that will decide our collective future.

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