The Danger of False Dichotomies

By Vicki Kubler LaBoskey

dichotomy: a division or the process of dividing into two especially mutually exclusive or contradictory groups (*The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, 1974)

Alan H. Jones' invitation to discuss the future of teacher education came to us in the form of oppositional categories—"dichotom[ies] of opinion and action in the field." I know that he did so not because it represents his way of thinking about the issues, but because it characterizes with chilling accuracy our common approach to educational problem-solving. It is such dichotomous thinking, more than anything else, I think, that contributes to the continuation of our difficulties, and thus, it is this that I wish to address.

We spend much too much of our limited time, energy, and resources debating these "false dichotomies." Instead of coming together as a community deeply concerned about the future of our children, we make artificial enemies of one another. This is quite apparent in the ten points astutely identified by Jones as current areas of contention in the field of teacher education. None of them represent two mutually exclusive or contradictory groups from which we might or must choose. Two related topics, "professional versus public" and "information versus myth," do not even include two legitimate options. Education is an extremely complex enterprise that has accumulated a very large body of knowledge. It ought to be obvious to all that educational

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decisions need to be based upon the best, most accurate, most substantiated information we have available, and that those decisions need to be in the hands of professionals (meaning accredited individuals in all parts of the system) because they are in the best position to know and to understand that body of knowledge in relation to the interests and needs of the constituencies whom they serve—period—end of debate.

The other eight points do include two legitimate aspects, but they are not, nor should they be, oppositional. We should be figuring out ways to accomplish both rather than one or the other:

- We must prepare enough teachers to teach all students, but we cannot sacrifice quality in the process of doing so.
- We need to recruit more teachers of color, and we need to prepare all teachers to teach diverse learners well.
- We need to improve both preservice and inservice teacher education.
- Colleges, universities, and K-12 institutions need to collaborate in the education of new and continuing teachers.
- We need to provide both time and money to the enterprise.
- Teachers need to be both specialists in specific areas and generalists in good education.
- Theory and practice should go hand-in-hand.
- We need to address short-range goals within the context of long-range vision and planning.

All of these issues are critical and deserve our serious attention. I could discuss each one at length, but since space is limited and the issues are closely interrelated, I will focus my discussion on just two—"preservice versus inservice" and "campus versus school site." I have selected these because they are most salient for me at the moment, as a result of my current work with a school/university partnership and with a California Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Project. I have been involved in each of these programs for approximately five years and have learned many valuable lessons.

The first, and the one most relevant to the topic at hand, is that we need each other—the schools and the colleges—in this enterprise of teacher education. We bring different orientations and forms of expertise and offer distinct learning opportunities. The schools are where the interaction between K-12 teachers and their students actually occurs; there is much about the teaching/learning process that can only be learned in these settings. Practicing teachers are the experts on their particular contexts; they know about the moment-by-moment events of the day; and they are deeply concerned with questions about Lucia and Jerome, about the availability of working microscopes for tomorrow's science lesson and the questions they might ask to help their students really understand the meaning of Manifest Destiny. We at the university, both faculty and student teachers, need their

expertise; we must view the process through their lenses. It would be ludicrous to propose otherwise.

But it has been just as obvious to most of the teachers who have participated in our school/university project that they have benefited from the college setting in ways that were simply not available to them at their sites. They needed the opportunity to step away from the heat of the moment and ask other questions, look through different lenses. The college experience provided them with more subject matter knowledge from subject matter experts and with information about teaching in other contexts from reading the literature and interactions with colleagues in other schools. Research is at the center of university work; it is a required area of expertise for college faculty, who were thus well-positioned to support the teachers in their efforts to develop or maintain an inquiry orientation toward their practice. We felt a mutual respect for one another because we understood that we brought different skills and understandings to the table and that all had value; we recognized that we were able to accomplish more together than we could have alone. It was patently obvious to anyone paying attention that it would be counterproductive to argue over which is better or more necessary—the campus or the school site. When we value our differences and pool our expertise, the children are the beneficiaries.

The second lesson I learned, or re-learned, was that the separation between preservice and inservice teacher education is artificial. Indeed to even make such a distinction is oppositional to my definitions of teaching and learning. It makes it appear as if learning is finite—that at some point you will be finished or will have learned enough. It makes it seem that teaching is a technical task that can be mastered in a few weeks or months prior to practice or only on-the-job in a series of workshops or via the accumulation of unmediated experience.

Teaching is a complex and uncertain enterprise; there are never any simple or correct answers. Therefore, teachers need to have an inquiry orientation; they must see themselves as learners—as question-posers and problem-solvers. From the moment they enter the career until the moment they leave it, they have to see themselves as engaged in the education of the self, as well as of others. Therefore, we cannot ask whether we should emphasize preservice education or inservice education. The question must instead relate to how we might create a seamless whole. How might we structure preservice and inservice education so that teachers will see themselves as life-long learners and so that schools can function as learning institutions for adults as well as children, to the benefit of both?

In the new teacher support project with which I have been working, it is apparent to both my school site partners and me that many in the school settings, including new teachers, veteran mentors, and administrators, see no relation between preservice and inservice education. Indeed several seem to experience preservice education as largely irrelevant to inservice activity. They believe that the goal for new teachers is survival rather than learning and thus conceive of the purpose of new teacher support to be technical intervention. What is also apparent

to us is that the reason for this is more institutional than individual; it has to do with false dichotomies. If we stopped arguing about which is better, stopped pitting the "ivory tower" against the "real world," we might begin to focus on the more important questions like, "Why is survival such an issue in the first place?" "If we really wanted schools to be learning institutions for all, including new teachers, what might they look like?" And we might answer thusly: "Schools would be places where new teachers had easier assignments and fewer requirements. We would build in more time for beginning, as well as experienced teachers, to reflect upon, discuss, and analyze their own practice, and, on that basis, plan powerful learning opportunities for themselves and their students." Dichotomous thinking diverts our attention from the more important issues. In addition, it causes us to frame problems inappropriately, leading us to seek the wrong answers.

In other professions like law or medicine, they do not tend to pit preservice education against inservice education. It is generally agreed that there is much one needs to know prior to practice. Thankfully, physicians would not allow someone to perform surgery without prior study that is both academic and practical in nature. Lawyers agree that one needs to know some law before entering a courtroom. Both organizations also require on-going, career-long professional development. Likewise, educators ought to agree that there is much teachers need to know before they enter a classroom full of young people and that they need to continue to learn throughout their careers. It should not be a question of whether, but of what—what do they need to know in preservice education so that they can both respond, as appropriately as possible, to their current situations and continue to grow and develop over time.

Another unfortunate outcome of dichotomous thinking is its tendency to promote a search for "one right answer." If we perceive mutually exclusive categories, we tend to believe we can choose this or that, one or the other, but not both. Rather than thinking in terms of compromise or creative modifications, we focus our energies upon the identification of the ideal solution—the "best" practice. In his presentation of the preservice versus inservice dichotomy, Jones raises just such a question: "[I]s there a preferred program format and a best structure and procedure for establishing and maintaining cooperative links between higher education and the public schools, or are there instead many alternative and appropriate approaches?" He refers to the fact that many who believe in the former are currently promoting the Professional Development School as that "best structure." The problem is that this approach distorts the educational process; it, again, diverts attention from the real issues. In this instance, the creation of a professional development school becomes the aim, when really the goal should be for all educators to work together in the best interests of the children. Professional Development Schools may be a good solution in some situations, but there may be different and better choices in others. Besides, "Professional Development School" is not a singular option; there are many ways to construct it—some successful and

others not so successful. It is the nature of the relationships that exist within a particular institution or program or strategy—the influence it is having on the students it serves—that matters, not the thing itself. In the search for "best" practice, we tend to lose sight of the fact that the real "best" practice is the journey itself.

We face a tremendous challenge—preparing multitudes of qualified teachers for the children of the twenty-first century. To do so, all professional educators must work together; we need to pool our energies and expertise to develop as many different ways of solving this problem as possible. Dichotomous thinking is not only a waste of precious time, it is highly detrimental. It often pits one important goal against another, making it less likely we will achieve either because it divides our resources and because it makes us appear less competent in the public eye, thus opening the door to ill-informed interventions. Lastly, it distracts us from the real issues and promotes a futile search for one right answers. "What can and should we in teacher education do to best fulfill our role of preparing the highest quality teachers possible for our community's and our nation's public schools?" End the debate over "false dichotomies."