

Two Points of Debate in Teacher Education

By Donald Arnstine

At the end of "Ten Points of Debate in Teacher Education: Looking for Answers to Guide Our Future," Alan H. Jones offers a key to unlocking the compartments in which "many of these areas of difficulty in teacher education" are kept isolated. These points of debate are, he writes, "symptoms of larger problems in society, and most often the potential and desired solutions are the province of policymakers outside our immediate field."

In this essay I'd like to carry this important point a little further. More specifically, I'll examine Jones's "Ten Points" to see which ones fall into the category, "symptoms of larger problems in society," and which ones fall within the province of the teacher education community. My aim is not to settle these points of debate, but only to suggest in which of them it makes sense for us (teacher educators) to participate. I will boil down these ten points of debate to just two, and

then suggest that we dismiss one of them so we can get busy on the other. I'll begin with the first of these two points, the dependence of policy in teacher education on a wider but not always very wise public.

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Jones notes (in *Quality Versus Quantity*, and *Time Versus Money*) several contradictions inherent in our work. We try to maintain high standards of

teacher preparation and at the same time prepare people to receive emergency credentials to fill classroom needs. We have low institutional budgets and have to charge high tuition to people preparing to take low-paying jobs. Meanwhile, people with high SAT scores tend to select professions other than teaching. All this is true, and there's not much teacher educators can do about it.

In a society that values the education of its young, schools don't look like slums, teachers are respected and well paid, and society—not teacher candidates—bears the expense of educating teachers. But in our society, college drop-outs receive multimillion dollar contracts to play football and corporate CEOs are paid a hundred times the salary of the people who work for them. We are a rich society but we do not spend our wealth on teacher education or schools, or on very many other public services. This is a political problem (not an educational or a theoretical one) which none of our major political parties or "leaders" care to discuss.

Jones notes (in *Professional Versus Public, Information Versus Myth, and Long Range Versus Short Range*) how many academic, political, and commercial fingers are dabbling in the teacher education pie. He asks, "Who's in charge? Who ought to be?" and follows up by noting that the "crisis" literature of Blue Ribbon committees (like the *Nation at Risk* report) has had more influence on the public than the more reliable work of scholars like John Goodlad and TheodoreSizer. Finally, Jones deplores the "quick fix" approach in teacher education (last year, a one-unit course in drug education, this year, a one-unit course on sexual harrassment) that ignores long-range problems in school and society.

This trio of evils can be traced to the same causes as the two above. Holding teachers and teacher educators in low regard, the public and its alleged representatives make their own professional and policy decisions about schools. Of course, the public and its leaders do not work directly with groups of children or read the materials of those who do, or of those who study educational settings. Under these circumstances it isn't surprising that schools and the education of teachers are condemned to "quick fixes" in perpetuity.

For example, after a 1998 poll, think-tankers in California concluded "that voters want state lawmakers to 'get tough on education,' but to leave to local schools decisions about spending priorities and teaching methods."¹ In other words, legislators are to set goals that either cannot be met (e.g., "higher standards" for all students in an approved list of subjects) or that have doubtful utility if they are met (e.g., eight more school days a year). But teachers are to be free to achieve these goals any way they like. This establishes a dangerous separation between ends and means: the people who set the goals are entirely different from the ones expected to carry them out. Furthermore, the goal-setters are not well situated to assess the consequences of acting on their policies. These inherent contradictions can be expected only to produce another round of complaints about teachers and teacher educators.

The movement to take policymaking out of the hands of teachers and schools has recently been exacerbated by politicians. Wishing to score points with voters by

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showing how much they care about education, George Bush, Bill Clinton, and their imitators think that schools can be helped by being privatized, or supplied with a standardized curriculum and standardized exams. But these are political goals, not educational ones. Privatizing schools can't guarantee a better education, but it would certainly destroy the public purposes of public schools. And standardization of curriculum and exams not only denies the diversity in our students, but also suppresses the fundamental educational aim of developing their socially prized individuality. Thus educational policy in the hands of vote-seeking politicians is a disaster for public education.

Public school teachers have not had the time, the financial resources, or the organization to confront the anti-intellectualism and conservatism of politicians and the media and the gullibility of the public. Teacher educators are much better positioned to do so. But can they effectively bring to the public sound ideas about the role of teachers and schools? Only if they think it's important to do so, *and if they have ideas of their own* about how teachers and young people ought to be educated. This brings us to the other five points of debate that Jones discussed: the ones that turn on the question of how we think people (including teachers) learn.

Because these five points of debate all depend on how we conceive of the learning process, we must confront an embarrassment: there appears to be no clear and publically acknowledged agreement in the teacher education profession about how people learn. Until there is, the public has some reason to mistrust its teacher educators and its teachers. This point will be clarified by examining it in the context of the five points of debate now under consideration. Together, they constitute my second point, the competence and integrity of the teacher education profession.

In each of the debates about the education of teachers (Preservice Versus Inservice, Campus Versus School Site, Theory Versus Practice), the issue turns on whether teacher candidates are best served by direct experience in schools or by the study of the theoretical (social, philosophical, and psychological) foundations of education. Of course, *everybody* believes in an appropriate union of theory and practice, but down in the trenches the old hands snort at theory and the publish-or-perish types sniff at practice. But this isn't just a stand-off; it's a defeat for both sides. For if teacher educators, presumably the experts, can't agree among themselves on so fundamental an issue as how people learn to become effective teachers, why *should* the public trust (and financially support) them?

Let us grant that the issue is trickier than your local news anchor would be willing to admit. It is, after all, not just a matter of agreeing on effective ways of stuffing young heads with information. We have bigger fish to fry: preparing the young to become thoughtful and cooperating citizens in a democracy. This isn't just one more goal on a long list; it is the goal that takes precedence over all others.

For half a century John Dewey reminded his readers that *all* societies educate their young in order to maintain their characteristic way of life. Our society is a uniquely democratic one, and if we are ever to agree about what we're trying to do

as teacher educators, we need to start talking with each other about the ways that democratic ends and means should guide the conduct of our teaching. Such a dialogue can bear fruit if it entertains powerful ideas that have been carefully thought through and tested in both individual and institutional practice.²

Jones's last two points of debate (Majority Versus Minority and Specialization Versus Generalization) also turn on the question of how people learn. The current attacks on affirmative action programs mean that teacher educators will have to continue to work with the largely white, anglo teacher candidates they get. But can anglos be educated to better serve minority youth? Again, this depends on how we think people learn. It is surely debatable whether success in remembering facts and taking exams qualifies a person to work effectively with the young. Again we confront contradictions that have been generated by politically motivated policymaking in education. For as long as we depend on competitive, standardized exams and the standardized curriculums they spawn, we will exclude people—from our schools and from the ranks of our teachers—who are racially and ethnically different.

This brings us to the debate over Specialization Versus Generalization. We began by asking, "Is there a psychology of teaching sixth grade math that's different from the psychology of teaching reading in the third grade?" Or "Is there a philosophy of teaching academic subjects that's different from a philosophy of teaching human relations?" Now we ask, "Do girls learn differently from boys?" and "Do African Americans learn differently from whites?" Thus problems of teaching and learning that have previously been solved by normal people exercising intelligence and sensitivity have been divided into a daunting array of (often self-serving) specializations. But if schoolteaching requires the specialized techniques of an army of experts, no one will be left to confront children *as* children, with all their varied interests and concerns.

There are, to be sure, specialized techniques to be learned that are effective with some learners but not with others, and teachers need to learn when to use which. But it's far more important for teachers to learn about what might be demonstrably *worth* teaching to the young, and pursuing this issue will tell us a great deal about *how* they'll learn it. This is a general and not a specialized matter, and it's worth the attention of everyone who teaches teachers. But the specialization now characteristic of large teacher education institutions puts blinders on the faculty. It keeps them from formulating policies of their own about the education of teachers, and it isolates them in specialized academic enclaves. Most important, specialization discourages educators from talking to each other—an activity from which people often learn. Along with its utilities, specialization in educating schoolteachers perpetuates the very ignorance and prejudice among teacher educators that prevents us from developing a clear and useful voice in the policy arenas where we could make a difference. That such a voice would be of great benefit to student teachers should be obvious.

We're still stuck with Jones's "Points of Debate"—debates deeply embedded

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in our often self-contradictory social, political, and educational traditions. While I can't settle them, I have suggested two strategies. First, let's not take the rap for problems generated by others, which only they can solve. As educators, we haven't got time for such distractions, although we can address them as citizens. And second, let's get our own house in order. Specifically, shouldn't we try to discover something about teaching and learning about which our training and wisdom would lead us to agree? *That* effort will require us to engage in a dialogue with one another across our specializations. And that, in turn, calls for something quite different from the current models offered by departmentalization, the American Educational Research Association and its multitude of Special Interest Groups, and our specialized journals. But the lack of inclusive and democratic models need not deter us, for all that's needed is a willingness to talk to our colleagues.

Notes

1. Deborah Anderluh, *The Sacramento Bee*, March 2, 1998, pp. 1, 4.
2. Key people in successful progressive schools, including some that are still operating, have explicitly acknowledged their debt to Dewey's ideas. See Donald Arnstine, *Democracy and the Arts of Schooling* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995, pp. 148-165.