

Waiting for Teacher Education

By Donald Warren

Historical perspective lends context to the issues Alan H. Jones describes. Fueled once again in 1998 by criticism from within and outside the profession, debate over teacher education has recurred for almost two centuries. Particular issues have varied with the times, but proposed improvements over the years have displayed noticeable similarities. As rancorous in the 1830s as in the 1990s, the sides of the debate have tended to unite on basic goals and rationale. To advance national well being, and the United States' global stature, teachers and students must be comparably proficient. The objects of achievement-envy have veered from France to Prussia, from the U.S.S.R. to Japan, but a pragmatic sense of purpose has survived.

Due perhaps to the recurring debate, teacher education has changed over time. Most notably, it shifted to a different point in the professionalization process. Throughout the 19th century, the great majority of teachers, those in common schools, secured their jobs and began their classroom assignments before undertaking formal preparation or advanced studies. Young women for the most part, often

teenagers, they passed along the level of education they had completed. Secondary school teachers usually had more academic preparation but little pedagogical training. Normal schools emerged during this period to serve new and experienced teachers alike. Late in the century, these institutions still functioned at the level of secondary education, some

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having been established as normal departments in urban high schools. They acquired higher education status slowly. Not until the 1950s did the majority of American teachers hold four-year college degrees.

The curriculum evolved as well, although broad categories remained unchanged. It comprised general education; probably a teaching speciality; academic study of education, including methods; and practice teaching. "Differentiation" emerged in the arts and sciences, inspiring a new field described by its advocates as the "science" of education. Charles H. Judd, for one, regretted the imitation as a misguided "hope of securing respectability," but not even he could weaken the hold of the liberal arts model on teacher education. In the 1930s preparation programs increased requirements in general education and the academic major, separated secondary from elementary methods, and de-emphasized general methods in favor of subject-specific methods. History of education lost out to courses in philosophy of education, educational psychology, and measurement. Child study gave rise to distinct developmental courses for elementary and secondary teachers. The normal schools that survived became teachers colleges, expanded to four-year institutions, and eventually graduated to the standing of multipurpose universities. Along the way, many grew embarrassed by their teacher education roots. Additive reform has characterized the development all along.

Demographic and economic factors shaped the process and its effects as significantly as curriculum theory and the reform agenda. Formal teacher education may have sprung from the ideals of Mary Lyon, Henry Barnard, and Catherine Beecher, but impetus for the spread of institutions came from the rapid growth of teaching positions, fed by rising enrollments in common schools. From the 1840s onward, as local and state systems of common schools formed across the country, the number of jobs multiplied, doubling and in some states tripling every decade throughout the 19th century. Looking for meaningful employment and willing to work for lower pay than their male counterparts, women grasped the opportunities. Preparation for teaching came afterwards, as state and district school administrators sought to raise the new recruits' educational levels while inserting dashes of pedagogical skill. State legislators responded gradually and often reluctantly with funds for teacher institutes and later for normal schools.

In general the educational level of teachers has remained at the national average. When common schooling met the aspirations of most people, it was good enough for teachers. As secondary school enrollments grew, the level of teacher preparation rose. Demographic pressures continued into the 20th century, as educational aspirations of the general population climbed. Reformers advocating graduate level preservice teacher education in the 1990s want to write the latest chapter in this progressive story.

States and localities could pay for the expansion, despite cash poor agricultural economies, because teachers cost so little. In addition to low salaries, they performed virtually all the work of schoolkeeping, from building maintenance to

curriculum development, and often used their own funds to purchase study materials, food, and clothing for their students. Given the low salaries and other costs, there should be little surprise that teachers sought to minimize their preparation expenses. Getting the job before the training represented for most a wise financial strategy.

This sketch weaves together familiar and new historical accounts. The old story told of progressive successes: institutions and programs gradually qualifying for higher education status, teachers completing preparation before they assumed professional responsibilities, and education researchers laying needed "scientific" foundation. The new version, relying on recent scholarship, sees a more circular development and poses questions about the purposes it has served. It adds human dimension to the analysis, not to dismantle the evolved policy structures, but to connect professional preparation to the teaching and learning of teachers and ultimately their students. The new story is less interested in broad trends than in the educational effects that occur one learner at a time.

Cast in historical perspective, Jones's list of issues suggests that teacher education awaits a sense of its own priorities. But correcting the deficiency may prove difficult. Four dilemmas strike me as crucial to the task of rethinking and deepening the reform agenda.

The Arts and Sciences Problem:

New Knowledge, Cracked Vessels

The liberal arts curriculum has served teacher education as a kind of grey eminence. It hovered as background, outlined preconditions to be met by teacher education students, and set academic models frankly envied by teacher educators. The arts and sciences posed problems for teacher education in that they had to be accommodated, but the disciplines themselves have not been problematic. Now they are.

New knowledge, augmented by advanced technology, has stimulated disputes within virtually every discipline over its content and research methods. The driving questions about the undergraduate curriculum—What constitutes a liberal arts education? What knowledge is most worth knowing?—no longer evoke readily accepted answers. Other queries follow: Do the pieces of the arts and sciences curriculum, or the courses in a single discipline, cohere? Should they? Is it conceptually possible or even desirable to design survey courses? Should emphasis in the undergraduate curriculum shift instead to inquiry? The yet-to-be resolved squabbles push the disciplines into unaccustomed fluidity and inspire multidisciplinary configurations that may prove permanent.

Student learning has also been placed at risk. Faculty at odds over the purpose and content of their discipline cannot easily agree on its course offerings. The curriculum development problem exacerbates a pre-existent one, namely the oft-

cited disinterest of the arts and sciences, particularly at research universities, in teaching undergraduates. Untrained pedagogically and traditionally disdainful of those who are, liberal arts faculty react with surprise at efforts by state legislators and their own governing boards to hold them accountable for student learning.

The uncertainties raise doubt about teacher education's traditional reliance on the arts and sciences. Despite instability in the disciplines, several recent proposals aim to increase the dependency. Some want to require preservice teachers to complete a disciplinary major, others to shift initial preparation to a fifth year or a master's program, and still others seek to recruit arts and sciences graduates to the teaching profession with only cursory pedagogical preparation. With no resolutions to the uncertainties in sight, the traditional academic foundation of teacher education remains weakened and unreliable. When they come, answers may vary by institution, depending on the resourcefulness of the teacher education faculty, supporting liberal arts colleagues, and professional partners in schools.

The Content-Pedagogy Problem:

False Dichotomies, Split Infinities

Longstanding criticism faults professional preparation for emphasizing teaching methods at the expense of content. Recent research casts this false dichotomy into history's dustbin. All students acquire disciplinary knowledge, methods of learning, and attitudes toward intellectual engagement simultaneously, whatever the instructor's intentions. Lectures, seminars, inquiry groups—each format can foster or impede academic attainments. The process can be particularly fateful for teacher education majors. Purposely or not, all their instructors model pedagogy. This inevitability renders the current instability in the arts and sciences even more problematic for teacher education. Content and pedagogy represent coincidental infinities, their continuous effects indefinitely linked. The supporting research for this finding may be new, but it confirms an old idea.

It is also at odds with a contemporary debate that perpetuates the dichotomy. Reconnecting the loose ends will require intense, strategic conceptual labor by teacher educators and their students, and in this effort educators in schools or universities who have imbibed too deeply the old notions pitting content against methods can offer little assistance. Solutions can be enforced temporarily, but durable reform will require an invigorated program culture, fostered institution by institution, in which inquiry on teaching and learning serves to advance content and pedagogical goals in concert with each other.

The Uniformity Problem:

Diversity at the Gates

The oldest educational reform strategy in the United States has sought to achieve the "one best system." Originally, it was promoted to achieve equality of

opportunity, the same education for all students, but not even 19th century common schools reached that ideal. Nevertheless, it still shapes the drive for national models in teacher education. Although reformers find the goal attractive, if illusive, public sentiment has remained ambivalent. For one, implying national standards, it flies in the face of constitutional realities for state and federal jurisdictions and, more to the point, Americans' historic reluctance to remove educational controls very far from the institutions where teaching and learning occur. The current debate over "standards-driven" reform replays this persistent controversy. New complexities have been introduced by the inability of the disciplines to reach consensus on what the standards ought to be and by conflicts among academics over the goals and structures of their respective fields. Arguing about the accommodation of content to pedagogy, teacher educators add to the uncertainty.

Even if debate over the liberal arts and professional preparation curricula could be resolved, valid and reliable assessments of learning remain in dispute. Like all other fields, evaluation has entered a period of profound transition. Diversity and variability, characteristics that mirror the demography of students at different learning levels, run rampant through all the disciplines and professional fields, including teacher education. Under such conditions, uniform expectations and outcomes, assuming they are desirable, will have to surface voluntarily from within programs. This localized accountability opens a window of possibility for innovation at individual institutions. If the approach proves beneficial, it could become a continuing dynamic in teacher education.

The Purpose Problem

A decade ago, Maxine Greene at yet another national colloquium, reviewed episodes in the centuries-old debate over teacher education. Against the familiar emphasis on courses, requirements, and measured competencies, she defined education as transforming. It changed people from the way they were "before." How, she asked, "would the model of technical rationality account for what is involved in teaching someone, enabling someone, to have an experience like that?" Drawn from literature and the arts as much as from history and philosophy, her answers stipulated reflection, passion, involvement, and critical encounters with the disciplines. She viewed the 1980s as a particularly needful time for these educational possibilities, given the pressures for sharpening the nation's competitive edge in world markets through quick remedies of failures widely attributed to teachers and students.

As Jones suggests, such admonitions and proposals have remained at the margins of the teacher education debate that has continued into the 1990s. The issues he reports on do indeed dominate the exchanges, as they have for a long time. Greene helps us see what the reform agenda might look like if we opened the floor to new business.

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