Thinking about Educator Preparation in the Twenty-First Century: A Deweyan Perspective

By Douglas J. Simpson

Part I

The questions that are raised in this issue of *Teacher Education Quarterly* are timely in a number of ways and of special interest to those of us who help prepare aspiring and practicing educators. The questions raised cannot be ignored without the risk of important, negative results for educators, P-12 students, and society. On the other hand, the issues—as stated in synoptic form—are dichotomies, i. e., quality versus quantity, majority versus minority, preservice versus inservice, campus versus school site, time versus money, specialization versus generalization, theory versus practice, professional versus public, information versus myth, and long-range versus short-range. As presently worded, these statements are nicely set for what may be called a grand critique from a Deweyan perspective. This inquiry, however, can wait for the moment, for reference needs to be made to Alan H. Jones' closing question: "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?" Mention of this question is critical since Jones appears to be teasing us to think reflectively about the aforementioned dichotomies

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and to think beyond them to address whatever issues we consider most pertinent to our future as a profession and, perhaps, as a society. With this in mind, we turn now to how we may improve our thinking about the aforementioned concerns and, ideally, our choices from John Dewey's perspective.

Part II

As we approach the Twenty-First Century, it seems beneficial to remind ourselves of Dewey's warnings about how we are inclined to think when we are confronted with controversy in the realm of practical and theoretical educational problems. Several factors or considerations, so he thinks, need to inform our thinking when we engage in discussions of educational issues. First, it is important to recognize that from a Deweyan perspective debate and controversy about education is not undesirable. Indeed, Dewey, unlike many people, believes that disputes are potentially healthy and educative, for they stimulate communication of ideas and values, clarification of beliefs and positions, and questioning of entrenched beliefs and practices. In a pluralistic society, the stimuli to think are increased, for "diversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenge to thought" (1916/1966, p. 85). Furthermore, Dewey believes expressed differences of opinion may reveal existing and lead to new commonalities among drastically different individuals and groups in society. Consequently, individuals and communities can and should grow through seeking insight into and solution of problems. Problems, contrary to the wishes of many, should not be ignored or avoided in the interest of harmony (1938/1963, p. 5). Wanting to promote debate and thinking about the issues raised by Jones, then, is well-advised unless such leads to "too much thinking" or the kind of thinking that results in paralysis and inactivity (1933/1960, p. 44). Arguments surrounding and behind these dichotomies need to continue if we are going to understand the complexities of the issues and the proposed answers that merit consideration. Brief discussions and simplistic answers by busy people are unlikely to be genuinely fruitful on these topics.

Second, Dewey notes in *Experience and Education* that it is our responsibility to

> ...ascertain the causes for the conflicts that exist and then, instead of taking one side or the other, to indicate a plan of operations proceeding from a level deeper and more inclusive than is represented by the practices and ideas of the contending parties. (p. 5)

If we are to make progress in our debates, Dewey argues that we must dig deeper into the problems, below the level of many of our discussions about controversial educational issues. Empirical data, quantitative and qualitative, ought to be examined. Philosophical and perceptual assumptions must be uncovered, debated, and, ideally, justified. Cultural and gender bias should be identified. Hermeneutical presuppositions and political ramifications need to be unmasked. Conceptual clarity and logical consistency are necessary. Ethical and moral implications have

to be explored. In essence, we must take the time to ensure that the thinking and plans that emerge from deliberations are based upon "a level deeper" and are "more inclusive" than the shallow and exclusive ideas and plans that we frequently consider. Many, if not all, voices, especially the ones we do not wish to hear, need to be heard. Our tendency instead, at least on many occasions, is (1) to stay on the same customary level of debate by refusing to examine new arguments and contradictory data and (2) to seek to exclude every aspect of alternative positions by focusing almost exclusively on their weaknesses.

If we in fact wish to make progress in our educational thinking and practice, we have to evaluate the merits of arguments, including those concerning both quality and quantity. Legitimate ideas exist in seemingly contradictory arguments for one or the other side of this debate. Dewey reasons, for instance, that "the only way to increase the learning of pupils is to augment the quantity and quality of real teaching" (1933/1960, p. 36). May we not also draw a similar conclusion about preparing future teachers? If present trends continue, we will need many new and better prepared teachers in the future. The claim that we will need to employ some persons as teachers who are not adequately prepared—although we would hardly ever employ these words in a public discussion of the topic—is probably beyond question. That we have to or should permanently license inadequately prepared teachers is manifestly both nonsensical and unethical. Because we need to hire some less than fully prepared teachers does not mean that we cannot require that these teachers-in-the-making do extensive study and preparation after they are employed and before they become fully licensed. Predictable need for hundreds of thousands of teachers does not mean that there should be a lowering of standards for full licensure. To continue to think we must or should license everyone who completes brief workshops on teaching methodology and classroom management and passes a paper-and-pencil examination is to refuse to take seriously the interests and needs of millions of students.

Part III

Dewey argues in *The Child and Curriculum* that it is helpful, if we really want to understand one another and genuinely wish to grow in our understanding of the issues that we face, to get "away from the meaning of terms that is already fixed" (1900/1990, p. 181). We need to come to "see the conditions [of a dispute] from another point of view, and hence in a fresh light" (1900/1990, p. 182). But he thinks we are not inclined to look for fresh light by reconstructing the problem with different terms because it requires

> Travail of thought. Easier than thinking with surrender of already formed ideas and detachment from facts already learned is just to stick by what is already said, looking about for something with which to buttress it against attack. (1900/1990, p. 182)

Travail of thought? Here Dewey utilizes old-fashioned language for a significant point: If we want to think about educational issues, including our own perceptions

of the significance of facts and the meaning of terms, we have to struggle to think differently, comprehensively, and clearly about matters. Thinking requires preparation, effort, and hard work. Plus, we need to listen to one another. Occasionally, we need to abandon, at least temporarily, our terminology. For example, how often do we hear people speak of the need to be more *practical* and less *theoretical* without any explanation of what either term means? Is not the situation as Dewey describes it when he cites Justice Holmes: "theory is the most practical thing, for good or for evil, in the world" (1920/1957, p. xli)? Indeed, is it not a theoretical claim that teacher education should become more practical? But we still have not abandoned our terms to get clearer about the concepts that are housed in *theory* and *practice*. Reading Dewey's essay entitled "The Relation of Theory to Practice in Education" may be very informative (Archambault, 1964/1974, pp. 313-338). In passing, however, we pause to ask why we hear so much about theory and practice and so little about *research*, theory, practice, and *judgment*?

Dewey further maintains that we are plagued by two additional and related problems when we debate educational matters. If we seek to avoid thinking in terms of "extreme opposites" or "either-or" options or reject dichotomous thinking, we are often inclined to *compromise* in our resulting synthesis of ideas. Our eclecticism is filled with problematic and contradictory claims and practices. That is to say, we are inclined to rush past or brush aside critical issues for the sake of harmony and carry forward in our thinking and practice both unwarranted and warranted ideas and practices. We mix conflicting and unsubstantiated positions with coherent and substantiated ideas in order to satisfy competing political or pedagogical camps. The result is a hodgepodge of ideas that is not based upon a rigorous, reflective, and sustained discussion of matters (1938/1963, p. 17). An example of this kind of thinking may be found in the professional versus public dichotomy or when schools or educators abandon their professional training, expertise, and judgment for the sake of getting along with parents when a controversy arises. When educators interact with parents and other interested parties, we have a responsibility, if Dewey is correct, to educate one another as well as to learn from each other. Being slow and deliberate in our discussions and debates is much more preferable than capitulating to the ill-informed ideas of others. The tendency to appease others, then, needs to be overcome from Dewey's point of view. Educators need to be both courageous and educative.

Part IV

Reactionary thinking, if Dewey is to be believed, is a major problem in the way many of us think. He maintains that we are prone to subscribe to an ideology or ism—e.g., progressivism or traditionalism—in a dogmatic way and that when another ism challenges some aspect or feature of our ism we react against the ism and are "unwittingly controlled" by it. Thus, our thinking is shaped by a reaction to what we dislike rather than by "a comprehensive, constructive survey of actual

needs, problems, and possibilities" (1938/1963, p. 6). We seem well-advised to ask ourselves what the isms are today that sometimes stymie our thinking and blind our seeing. Do we allow our commitment to or against constructivism, postmodernism, communitarianism, feminism, deschooling, Eurocentrism, Afrocentrism, evangelicalism, and pragmatism to control our thinking and practice? Or are there other more powerful isms in our lives?

Reactionary thinking is made all the more troublesome when it is combined with dogmatic thinking: the habit of failing to examine critically our own "underlying principles" (1938/1963, p. 22). Cases of reactionary and dogmatic thinking abound in educational discussions. Take the case of campus-based versus school-based educator preparation programs. If some proponents of school-based programs are to be believed, an off-campus education course is automatically superior to a campus-based one merely because it is in an elementary, middle, or high school. Other variables appear irrelevant. Time to plan for a significantly different course and for adequate space for the course, for example, are frequently ignored. Nor do some proponents of school-based programs sound as if they really believe that there is any room for a course, in whole or in part, to be taught on a university campus or in a museum, a zoo, or a public housing division. To argue against this dogma is sometimes met with knowing looks and condescending remarks, such as: "If you are not interested in getting into the twenty-first century, other teacher preparation alternatives will replace university programs."

Certainly, we need to replace stale, irrelevant, and unchallenging courses with better offerings regardless of where they are taught. Unquestionably, many courses would be improved if they were either field-based or involved more and more reflective school experiences for future teachers. Even so, we must not allow ourselves to be reactive and to replace undesirable campus-based courses with a-theoretical, non-research-based, content-deprived, and unexamined experiences in schools. The ideas, attitudes, and behaviors aspiring educators learn in schools can be as thoughtful and empowering or as senseless and unproductive as those they learn on university campuses. Understanding schools, of course, is critical, but thinking about schools needs to be informed by theory, research, and reflection as well as the reflective experiential understanding of practitioners. Likewise, if we are to make the kind of progress we desire in the next millennium, we must back away from our dogmatic attitudes and welcome the questioning of each other. Our prized assumptions and beliefs must be open to the critical inquiry of others. If not, we will surely suffer the consequences as professionals, and we will not model important attitudes and dispositions for new educators and students.

Part V

Jones' question—"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?"—is answered in part by Dewey as follows: (1) create experiences and environments for aspiring and practicing educators that cultivate reflection, and (2) develop and sustain learning conditions that stimulate students and practitioners to question dogmatic stances, dichotomous thinking, reactionary positions, doctrinaire isms, and eclectic compromises. In *How We Think*, he clarifies these points by saying that we should prepare educators who are thoughtful persons and that such people are:

> ...heedful, not rash; they look about, are circumspect instead of going ahead blindly. They weigh, ponder, deliberate—terms that imply a careful comparing and balancing what occurs to them in order to decide upon its force and weight for their problem. Moreover, the thoughtful person looks into matters; he scrutinizes, inspects, examines. He does not, in other words, take observations at their face value, but probes them to see whether they are what they seem to be. (1933/1960, p. 76)

Dewey concludes:

> Finally, the thoughtful person "puts two and two together." He reckons, calculates, casts up an account. The word "reason" is connected etymologically with the word "ratio." The underlying idea here is *exactness of relationship*. All reflective thinking is a process of detecting relations; the terms just used indicate that *good* thinking is not contented with finding "any old kind" of relation but searches until a relation is found that is as accurately defined as conditions permit. (1933/1960, p. 77)

Schooling, of course, should be based on a great deal more than good thinking. Love of teaching, care for students, and sensitivity to ethical quandaries, to mention just a few, are also critical considerations. Good educator preparation programs, then, need to be based upon more than good thinking. But if other important considerations are to play their legitimate roles, they need to be examined reflectively, too, lest they devolve into mindless isms, dogmas, and compromises.

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