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# The End of Education in Teacher Education

## Thoughts on Reclaiming the Role of Social Foundations in Teacher Education

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In past editorials (Vol. 59, Nos. 1 and 5), we've argued that teacher educators should embrace the liberal arts and humanities and that teacher education candidates would benefit from being "liberally" educated. We're aware that what we've proposed goes against the grain of an established professional orientation, what some might even call a growing professional orthodoxy. It is an orthodoxy that purportedly supports reform-based content, constructivist-oriented learning, and student-focused pedagogy. This progressive framing of the learning and teaching process delineates, in so many ways, a powerful and intriguing set of approaches. But we have grave doubts about a method of professional preparation that relies solely on *any* single, dominant educational framework. The issue is not that we disagree with a constructivist or progressive orientation. Rather, we have serious concerns when a singular framework is offered to candidates as the sole lens through which to understand learning, schooling, and the larger social and political context. When few or no other options are considered, we train and inculcate—we aren't educating.

Candidates should not be trained or molded to fit a particular educational path—at least not without their informed and educated consent. Today, however, many (certainly not all) university-based teacher candidates are being inculcated to see teaching and schooling within a dominant, progressive paradigm. Given the range of possible paths and the admixture of educational orientations that have and could exist, a rather narrow, and some would argue ineffectual, path is being taken. Candidates are prepared for a professional role that frequently does not match the realities of public schooling. Future teachers' education should include (in part and at some point

in time in their professional development) an examination of their own personal and professional values as well as the larger educational and cultural values. The education we offer our candidates should engage them in the best that the liberal arts tradition has to offer: reflective self-discernment as well as critical cultural understanding. Without this sort of educational engagement—somewhere along their path of professional development—we are failing the profession, the larger public, as well as our schools' students.

At various times in our past, the social foundations, and the intellectual disciplines traditionally associated with it (history, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology), have played an important role in a reflectively oriented teacher education effort. It was through (but not only through) the social foundations that candidates came to see teaching as a profession and even possibly a vocation, to see teaching as entailing reasoned and reasonable judgment about educational ends and preferred pedagogical means. Professionally prepared teachers should learn how to inquire into as well as voice their understandings of students, learning, schools, and the varied cultural contexts of schooling. The philosophical and social foundations, when viewed as part of a liberal arts approach to teacher education, have enabled these distinct and varied understandings. This plurality of understandings, curricular approaches, and instructional practices is certainly a worthy goal. But today, we fear that all too many teacher education programs offer singular, not varied, understandings. In this article, we call

**Authors' Note:** As editors, we write editorials collaboratively and rotate authorship with each editorial.

for greater flexibility in and around the ways we examine teaching and schools and the manner in which we prepare our candidates for those schools. Without this flexibility, teacher education's shared blinders could easily become a stultifying professional orthodoxy.

### Obstacles to Educating the Profession

Unfortunately, significant and powerful countervailing pressures exist and act against a liberal arts-based approach. We've already pointed to one such pressure. Many teacher educators, believing that they know the educational path others should take, proceed to prepare teachers within a narrow "progressive" approach. This is problematic for a number of reasons, but here, we will outline two and then note a few other obstacles: This progressive approach veers toward inculcation, not education, and it is ineffectual.

We think it's safe to say that many university teacher education programs offer an initial nod to the variety of possible educational philosophies (conservative, progressive, and radical—but rarely spiritual) and then proceed with an essentially progressive (child-oriented) and constructivist view of classroom learning. We may be perpetuating an outlook in which E. D. Hirsch (1987, 1999) is considered anathema and even curricular orientations as potentially powerful as Lisa Delpit's (1995) approach to literacy and Bob Moses's (2001) *Algebra Project* are all too often ignored. If an educational perspective lies outside the dominant progressive framework, we fear that candidates either hear little about it or are informed mostly about its sins. KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Programs) schools tend to fall within this objectionable spectrum. KIPP schools are usually denigrated as much too labor intensive for teachers, too "authoritarian" for the students, and too intrusive on family life. Much is left out of our teacher preparation programs, and as a result, within this sort of "intellectual" environment, our teacher candidates are "schooled" to a progressive order. They are not offered significantly distinct educational ends or curricular options so as to facilitate their understanding of themselves and the educational world. Such a narrow framing runs counter to a defensible educational and professional preparation.

Another obstacle exists: Given the dominant ideological orientation of the education professoriate, many university candidates are prepared for an educational order that has yet to come into existence within our public schools. As a result, they are ill prepared for the classrooms that do exist. It has become a common refrain that too many university-prepared teachers require a substantial skill and attitude readjustment as they enter

schools and the work force. As teacher candidates, they are introduced to the conceptual underpinnings of mathematics, routes to creating an expressive literary voice, or ways to plumb the depths of scientific investigations. Once they enter the classroom textbooks, curriculum pacing schedules, seating charts, and the sweat and scent of students prevail. There is a mismatch here. No matter how intellectually powerful and attractive constructivist notions of learning are, it takes a special teacher to bring it all to life within the institutional contexts of public schooling. Somehow the gap between teacher education aspirations and public school reality need to be more thoroughly addressed.

### More Obstacles

There are other dynamics, both within and without Schools of Education, that obstruct a more defensible professional preparation of teachers. These forces include the narrow nature of state teacher education standards, the exclusive grounding of teacher education in a purportedly empirically based and constructivist-inspired approach to learning, the failure of the social foundations faculty to engage teacher education candidates, and the narrowly utilitarian orientation of many alternative certification approaches.

States' standards for teacher education are reducing the curricular role of the social foundations. Given the academic content and skills orientation required by No Child Left Behind, greater emphasis is placed on preparing teachers who can get students to pass states' high-stakes assessments. Teacher preparation time is limited, and credit hours sometimes drastically reduced. Time spent has to be justified carefully and usually with an eye to K-12 student test scores. Our utilitarian model of public schooling is becoming more and more finely tuned and refined, not only constraining what goes on in K-12 settings but now affecting what occurs in higher education. More and more it seems that state standards deemphasize the role of professional inquiry in teacher education. Within our university settings, teacher educators are being called on to train, not educate, prospective teachers.

And it is not only state standards that are marginalizing the role of the social foundations. Reputable scholars delimit the role of the social foundations. Recently, articulated analyses of effective teacher education programs are long on classroom practice and analysis and empirically grounded sociocultural lenses but very short on philosophical and historical analysis or personal reflection. When we examine such authoritative texts as *Powerful Teacher Education* and *Preparing Teachers for a Changing World*, we find a delineation of the knowledge

base for teaching, one that offers descriptions and prescriptions grounded in the empirical findings within the constructivist learning sciences. This knowledge base points to the progressive educational path and marginalizes principles and knowledge derived from ethical and philosophical inquiries into schooling and teaching. A better balance needs to be achieved between the framings and lessons offered by the learning sciences and the insights and critiques offered by the social foundations. Texts exploring the wisdom of practice, construed broadly, could also be incorporated. Teaching and learning are intellectual and affective engagements. We need to mine that territory with our teacher candidates.

In some respects, this oversight of ends discourse and practical wisdom is quite understandable. In the past two decades, scholars in the social foundations have shown a great deal of fascination with the postmodern, postcolonial, and poststructural dimensions of their inherited intellectual framings. As a result, the “old-fashioned” social foundation goals of ethical deliberation and the discernment of educational ends have been relegated to the dustbins of rationalist, “enlightenment” practices. One consequence of the “postie” intellectual fad has been a nihilist framing of most things educational and one that ignores the power of a liberal arts approach. Recently, we have seen a number of engaging and thoughtful humanist texts that explore the nuances of teaching and learning. Works by Parker Palmer (2007), Robert Fried (2001), Tom Barone (2001), Sam Intrator (2003), Rachel Kessler (2000), and Mark Edmundson (2004) offer thoughtful texts for the exploration of teaching. Within teacher education, we tend to see these texts on the margins; there is room for a great deal more of these and other varied texts to find a place at the center of teacher education.

Along with these forces, there is the increasing popularity of state-approved alternative certification paths, urban teacher residential programs, and Teach for America. Although these programs vary greatly, few, if any, are known for their commitment to broad and reflectively oriented preparation. Instead, many of these programs train teachers in a particular district’s educational and more specific curricular programs. With multiple and intensive field immersion experiences, very little examination of curricular rationales, and little if any cultural, personal, or contextual framing, candidates are tooled into teachers—teachers trained in particular techniques.

### A Potential Response

Some might argue against our broad characterization of teacher education, claiming that within the past two

decades or so, teacher education has become enamored with and thoroughly committed to the notion of teaching as a reflective practice. In this imagined rejoinder, reflection and teaching as a reflective practice represent the kind of thoughtful deliberation whose absence we lament. Despite protests to the contrary, teachers *are* encouraged to reflect on their lessons; in fact, reflection has become a standard component in many university-sponsored as well as alternative programs. Reflection is embedded in both National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education expectations and state standards.

Although it may appear that this acclaimed prominence belies our concern, we don’t think it does. Since its introduction to the profession, reflection seems to have become simply another training technique in the arsenal of teacher inculcation. Rather than being employed as a means to examine and explore the variety of educational ends and values as well as our personal engagements, reflection is all too often employed as a technique to evaluate the achievement of prespecified outcomes. This came to light the other day when one of our master’s students (a teacher of 9 years) reminisced about his teacher preparation:

I got so fed up with all of our teacher prep requirements to reflect on our lessons. Reflect on this and reflect about that. Real soon it became trite and meaningless. Now, these days, I’d just like a minute or two to myself so that I could reflect—but back then it became kind of meaningless.

When teacher education programs require reflection, it is usually within a framework of “one right way”—frequently and largely defined as progressive, reform based, or constructivist. Candidates do not struggle with alternative understandings of what it means to be an educated person or a teacher. Instead, they are prepared to fit a largely predetermined and purportedly progressive role. Perhaps that’s better than the training-for-reality approaches that some alternative and residency programs provide. But it seems if these are our two main options, then we’re left with a rather limited, and inflexible, set of choices.

### Change We Can Believe In and Create

Now we realize that most any skilled instructor and defensible teacher preparation programs will embrace and attempt to put into practice a vision of good instruction and curriculum. Good teachers and sound teacher education programs do not spend their days continually

and endlessly deliberating among drastically distinct curricular approaches and instructional strategies. These teachers and programs know where they're headed. And to know where you're headed, you either are told or have to figure it out. Part of being a professional educator is figuring out which ends you desire.

What ails teacher education today is that it tends to offer programs fueled by a quest for certainty and motivated by a misplaced sense of efficacy and power. We need to understand that the wisdom of practice is much messier than the certainties we provide, much more provisional than the prescriptions we offer, and filled with a degree of human and educational tension that cannot be ignored. And part of being a professional and wise educator is understanding that we are all fallible and then coming to terms with the humility that kind of understanding provides. Certainty and doubt attend our daily teaching. Vulnerability and power are present in each and every classroom. Beauty and hate make our hearts race and engage and enrage our minds. Thoughtful emotion and passionate reason are present and can be further developed in our educational settings. The wise educator understands the pains and the pulls of these educational tensions.

Defensible teacher education programs facilitate an educational process that understands our personal and educational need to develop ends, revise them, work on them further, and sometimes simply change educational and life paths. Beginning teachers need to be a part of that educational process. They need to come to some initial resolution about the degree to which they want to teach as they have been taught, ask themselves whether they want to set their sights on a reform-based constructivist agenda of curriculum and instructional reform, ask themselves if it makes sense to use schools to pursue larger political goals of social justice, and question the view of teaching as a vocation and education as a journey. Having examined these ends, many new and practicing teachers settle on various combinations of these distinct goals. As professionals, they will need to revisit these aims again. We cannot hope to call our endeavor a profession unless we guide candidates through a process that honors the conversation of valued ends and recognizes the multiple ways in which teaching implicates the teacher's self.

As voters, citizens, and educators, U.S. teachers and teacher educators have come to prefer distinct political visions of equality, justice, and freedom. These can be hotly contested and debated, and they can also be the subject of deep, rich, thoughtful, and engaging conversations. Similarly, the desirability of distinct educational ends will and should be turned over, discussed, debated,

explored, and embraced. Beginning and experienced teachers, if given the opportunity, will choose diverse and varied ends. This variety is a testimony to our human reality and to the human predicament. Narrowly circumscribing our ends to the goals of progressive/constructivist reforms, to the utilitarian dictates of alternative and residential training programs, or to the nihilist tendencies of the postphilosophy du jour does not support educational change we can believe in or create. It simply affirms the prejudgments of the self-anointed.

Structures for delivering this sort of educational experience exist and can be created. They exist in the liberal arts, in the reflective and contemplative practices that truly examine, in the offering of distinct professional preparation pathways as choices for teacher candidates, and in the creation of distinct developmental structures for teacher roles and leadership within the schools. And what cannot be forgotten in all of these various approaches is the spirit of inquiry, self-examination, and humility. We must continually ask questions, questions that challenge and engage. With our educational texts and proposals in hand, we should follow Mark Edmundson (2004) with the central questions he poses for major humanist texts:

What I am asking when I ask of a major work (for only major works will sustain this question) whether it is true is quite simply this: Can you live it? Can you put it into action? Can you speak—or adapt—the language of this work, use it to talk to both yourself and others so as to live [and teach] better? Is this work a desirable source of [educational] belief[s]. Or at the very least, can it influence your existing [educational] beliefs in consequential ways? Can it make a difference? (p. 56, bracketed statements added)

If we continue on our current teacher inculcation path, without posing these important and related questions to future teachers, we will lack the basis for a more thorough and nuanced action. If teachers are professionals, we need to engage them in an examination of educational ends. These ends have been, and always will be, “essentially contested.” We need to be more flexible in our approach to professional education, to open the contest to varied and diverse ends.

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