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# Searching for Vitality in Teacher Education

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The hopes and dreams for our shared JTE editorship began 6 years ago over three bowls of tortilla soup. During that lunchtime meeting, through deliberation and debate, we formed our editorial vision statement. Scanning the professional horizon in fall 2003, we characterized the teacher education landscape for our American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) editorship proposal in the following terms:

Those committed to education share a historically unprecedented goal: To ensure *all* children will develop the knowledge, understandings, and competencies needed to reach their full potential and to contribute to our democratic society. Furthermore, most accept that quality teachers play a crucial role in realizing this aim. Yet, in the face of this common goal, different visions for how best to realize this aim compete in the marketplace of ideas. On the one hand, some reforms promote standards-based accountability systems, market-based approaches to public education, advocacy of direct instruction and prescribed curricula, and deregulation of teacher preparation and licensure. On the other hand, other reformers encourage a broader conception of the aims and purposes of education, a view of public schools as institutions uniquely charged with shaping and creating a fairer, equitable, and just society, a preference for pedagogies and assessments that focus on conceptual understanding, and the promotion of teaching as a profession. One thing is certain in all of this mix, a consensus about teaching, public schooling, and the role of teacher education does not exist. Add to these debates an increasing number of alternative and state-sanctioned routes to teacher certification, the changing cultural and class demographics of our public schools, the relatively stable white, middle-class pool of prospective and practicing teachers, and the decreasing state appropriations for higher education, and we end up with a terrain ripe for structural transformation.

While we don't believe these changes will be designed or guided solely by rational deliberations, we do maintain that the *Journal of Teacher Education* has and should provide a scholarly forum for the dissemination and examination of teacher education research, policy, and practice. If we were chosen to guide the

*Journal* in upcoming years we would provide a . . . setting where distinct and varied scholarly approaches could explore, interrogate, and illuminate the contours of teacher education.<sup>1</sup>

The guiding metaphor for our editorial vision was then and has continued to be a “conversation of many voices.” We believe that rich conversational lines with many distinct participants allow us to crisscross the ill-structured landscape of teaching and learning to teach, to explore and thereby affirm its complexity (Lampert, 2001; Spiro, Coulson, Feltovich, & Anderson, 1988/2004). Although understanding complexity is a scholar's primary aim (and delight), such multi-vocal conversations offer those involved in the endeavor opportunities to see the terrain from different vantage points and to cross well trodden paths in new places. Out of these encounters, it was our hope that fresh ideas and practices would emerge.

As we approached this, the final issue published under our editorship, we revisited our proposal statement. To some extent, we were discouraged. The statement written in 2003 could easily be written in 2009. The field continues to be in flux, and university-based teacher preparation is arguably more besieged today than when we began. We wondered about the vitality of our field: Is there any evidence or reason to believe that creative, vital, and powerful ideas and practices are being taken up in the field of teacher education? We asked individuals who hold diverse views to respond to the following question: Is there vitality in the field of teacher education? Their responses, both empirical and conceptual, follow in this issue.<sup>2</sup>

The set of papers suggests that there are both provocative new ideas and practices illustrating a degree of vigor and verve. Overall, we find evidence of vitality at different leverage points in the teacher preparation system. We also find that some foundational lines of thought about the larger purposes of education, and by extension teacher education, appear to be relegated, increasingly, to the conversational margins of how we prepare teachers. Furthermore, while attempts to

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breathe life into a creaking system are under way, many of these efforts are relatively small in scale and are occurring because there are substantial resources available to prove that an idea or an approach “works” and a few committed people willing to devote their time and energy to the task. Taken together, the articles in this themed issue offer a lively forum to explore varied aims, practices, and contexts for preparing the teaching force of the 21st century. And, although these debates are engaging and promising, we also fear that a training, not an educational, approach is in ascendency in our field. This approach may be one that diminishes the critical and intellectual capacities of teachers.

### Indications of Verve and Vigor

Reading across the articles in this issue, we notice several recurring themes or common features of those programs or preparation experiences that appear to be the most convincing expressions of vitality. First, the most vigorous preparation programs or experiences honor the complexity of teaching and learning. Deborah Ball and Francesca Forzani as well as Jacqueline Cossentino speak in compelling terms about the intricacy of teachers’ work. They argue that learning and mastering these intricacies is an essential aspect of teacher preparation, one that deserves renewed attention. Ball and Forzani’s explicit connection of robust practice to the mission of social justice offers a potent argument for the field to consider. Cossentino offers a probing analysis of the Montessori tradition of teacher preparation: To become a Montessorian involves enacting a specific pedagogical repertoire with increased care and precision. The honing of one’s craft is the mechanism by which teachers enter into Montessori culture in a coherent way. Both articles suggest that attending deeply to the craft of pedagogical traditions in teacher preparation respects teachers and the professional knowledge base of teaching.

Second, consistent with a situative perspective on teacher learning (Putnam & Borko, 2000), several articles elaborate on approaches that embed teacher preparation within local school or district settings. Urban teacher residency models (UTRs; see articles by Jesse Solomon and Davida Gatlin) are in ascendance. As a model, they compel because they fit with a research-based understanding of how teachers learn to teach and they respond to prevailing policy initiatives to deregulate or decentralize teacher education and locate its primary activities outside the traditional university-based setting. A different tack to this contextualized approach is the Graduate School of Education at the High Tech High (HTH) schools in San Diego (see the article by Caillier and Riordan). The Graduate School of the HTH teacher preparation program is located within reform-oriented schools designed to educate youth for the 21st-century landscape of globalization and technological innovations as well as interdisciplinarity and authentic problems. In many regards, the contextualized approach at HTH offers a blurring of Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools and Goodlad’s Partnership for School Renewal. As hybrid institutional structures, what stands out

in both UTRs and HTH is their focused mission on teacher development, their use of long established university-based teacher education practices, as well as the apparent infusion of robust external funding and the lifting of some of the bureaucratic constraints that many university-based programs must work within.

A final theme we note in the different examinations of vitality offered in this issue is the bold questioning that are posed. Frederick Hess, for example, challenges four “design assumptions” of university-based teacher preparation and he, in turn, asks the field to examine four commonplaces: “who should teach, where they should be trained, what teaching entails, and what it means to be a teacher.” Most provocative, he dares the field to imagine whether the medical profession’s notion of specialization has a place in the teaching profession. Wesley Null asks the field to examine the aims and purposes of the curriculum in normal schools. He claims that our “inadequate understanding” of our past has had destructive consequences and challenges us to revisit our roots and ask probingly what was abandoned when normal schools moved into the universities, what has been the cost to the profession, and how might we reclaim the philosophy of curriculum found in the teachers college tradition. Marilyn Cochran-Smith raises refreshing questions about the nature of evidence gathered and interpreted in assessing the outcomes of teacher education. At once, she dares us to imagine what it means in teacher education to combine the following two “big ideas”: (a) “the theory of making decisions about policy and practice on the basis of evidence” and (b) “institutional change requires revisions in the cultures of organizations.” At the same time, she soberly acknowledges the difficulty that inheres in “re-culturing teacher education.” Finally, on a much more personal note, Sam Intrator and Robert Kunzman grapple with the “emotional and intellectual distance between [their] work in the university setting and the K-12 classroom” and how teacher educators can forge identities that work within and across these two contexts. Collectively, these questions interweave the institutional, programmatic, and personal landscapes of teacher education.

### Foundational Conversations at the Margins

As we outlined above, one aspect of our conversational approach entails bringing as many distinct and diverse voices to the table. Given the prevailing discourse in our field, our desire for conversation has meant consistently and persistently bringing views that lie outside Schools of Education into the professional discourse. Two of our central editorial goals have been to increase the conversational richness and depth and to enlarge the circle of participants. As we worked to accomplish these goals, we also hoped that our own understandings would be enlarged, clarified, engaged, and stretched. Rich and engaging conversations about what matters should have us look at the world, schools, learning, teaching, and ourselves more thoughtfully and critically—both for

ourselves and our teacher candidates. A good education and sound professional preparation is one that challenges our understandings and prepares us to teach capably and effectively. The question that seems to confront us today is, Can we do both? Can we critically engage and effectively train prospective teachers? Should we?

We live, as human beings, citizens, and teachers, within circumscribed worldviews. Some of us think that a proper education is discipline based (e.g., Magdeline Lampert and Paul Hirst), others view education as bounded not by disciplinary practices but by interdisciplinary questions (e.g., Ted Sizer and Deb Meier), others argue that democratic principles and concerns for social justice demand a more politically oriented and activist slant (e.g., Bob Moses), others maintain that societal demands and real-life constraints require that schools produce a skilled workforce (e.g., Chester Finn), and still others see our lives as spiritually malnourished and reckon that significant transformation is in order (e.g., Parker Palmer). These are certainly not mutually exclusive orientations. We live in an educational world that offers rich variety and multiple conceptions of what it means to be a teacher, what we ought to learn, and what it means to learn. However, any coherent teaching practice must posit very real boundaries. Reform-based teachers of mathematics and literacy are quite critical of extant skill-based instruction and push to develop rich disciplinary understandings. The social justice orientation of someone like Bob Moses views teachers as community activists, integrally involved in life beyond the school walls while pursuing discipline-based skills and understandings. And, Parker Palmer's and the Center for Courage and Renewal's concern for teachers' and students' well-being translates into teachers' reprioritizing their personal and professional values in ways that may or may not conform to extant school practices. In any cogent and coherent professional preparation program or program of professional development, boundaries are created, pursued, and reinforced. Good teachers and teacher educators know their goals—understand their boundaries—and push for learning and achievement within those framings.

What we find in our responses to the vitality questions is that there seems to be a general agreement that a focus on teaching practice and a steadfast preparation for that practice have become more central to the field. Recommendations for how and where this focus on practice should occur differ in significant ways, as well as what provides the boundaries and limits of that focus. With Ball, the delimitation is centrally disciplinary—students are to be meaningfully initiated into what it means to “think mathematically” and prospective teachers should be trained to do so. For Cossentino, the boundaries are circumscribed by Montessori assumptions about practice and learning. In Boston College's example, the values of social justice and the logic of outcome-based assessments reign. In the Boston Teacher Residency efforts, the school district's needs for appropriately trained personnel along with its existing curricular practices inform the

boundaries. One of the questions that should be before us is, Should and can teachers be prepared within these bounded practices and, at the same time, be asked to examine their own assumptions and practices about teaching and learning? Can we train prospective teachers while they examine the intellectual, historical, and moral dimensions of those practices?

Forces fueling current developments in teacher preparation may not wait for us or others to provide considered responses. In previous editorials, we have noted the move away from educational foundations in the preparation of teachers. That continues today. As this editorial goes to print, a number of educational foundations scholars have planned a plenary session (followed by three luncheon meetings) at the 2009 Association of Educational Service Agencies conference in Pittsburgh. They plan, among other things, to discuss recent developments in National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education accreditation processes and the AACTE policy formulations that seem to diminish the role of social and political foundations in the teacher credentialing process (David Gabbard, personal communication). Will the fact that universities are no longer the sole sites for teacher preparation result in the disciplinary sources of foundational questions being nudged out of the certification process? Will we both train and educate our future teachers?

Stanley Fish (2008), in his recent (and polemical) book *Save the World on Your Own Time*, argues that unless professional programs engage students in the intellectual examination of the training aims and protocols, they train, not educate. Rita Tracy, one of our doctoral students at CU–Boulder, posed the following concern the other day. She observed that there are teachers

who are quite afraid of students closely examining their own thinking, who do not want to be challenged by their students. These teachers, the ones who disdain challenge and critical engagement of *their own* ideas, have not spent enough time examining their own beliefs. Often, teachers who worry about being challenged are those who believe there may be holes in their arguments, or that they have not found themselves, or are still wearing someone else's beliefs that don't quite fit. (personal communication)

Together, Fish and Tracy make a compelling point—training without educating seems quite problematic, and although signs of vitality certainly exist in our profession, indications of morbidity are surfacing.

## Farewell

In closing, we have found that the opportunity to serve as coeditors has enabled us to see the rich variety of existing and potential approaches to teacher preparation, to

appreciate and interrogate the distinct ways in which we can study those professional efforts, and to value the community of researchers and practitioners of which we are a part. We would like to thank that community, especially the many devoted and hardworking members of the JTE board of reviewers, the support staff at AACTE and Sage Publications, our two managing editors Katie Byrnes and Tanya Rose, and our respective families for their support during these past 6 years. And, we look forward to the future efforts of the UNLV editorial team, led by Sandra Odell. We wish them the best of luck and good fortune and pass along our hope that they may enact for the profession and themselves goals worth pursuing.

### Authors' Note

As an editorial team, the editors write editorials collaboratively. To reflect the nature of this joint work, they rotate the order of authors with each journal issue.

### Notes

1. This text is taken from CU–Boulder’s proposal to serve as editors submitted in December 2003 to the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education.
2. Several of the articles published in this issue were presented as part of the JTE/AACTE Major Forum, *Vitality in Teacher Education*, at the 2009 annual meeting of the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education held in Chicago, Illinois.

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