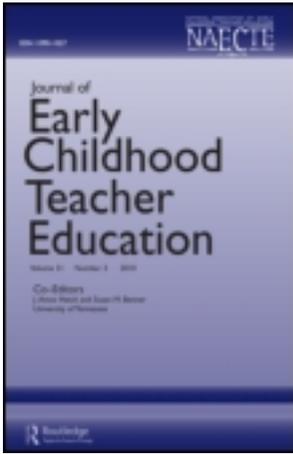


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The changing face of teacher education: building bridges/ forming new alliances☆

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1. Introduction

For teacher educators, the current public focus on education is particularly uncomfortable because teacher education is under fire as never before. Yet, for the most part, teacher educators have been quiet. Perhaps they are hoping that the pendulum of public opinion will soon swing away from calls for accountability and back to a more comfortable zone where there is less focus on schools and, thus, less attention given to simplistic solutions to improve the preparation of teachers. This pendulum shift is not likely to happen, however, at least not soon enough for those of us who are already fixed in the cross hairs of public criticism. Teacher educators can choose to be silent and let the debate concerning how to improve teacher education go on around us, or, we can find ways to enter this discussion and take a more active role in determining its resolution. Since teacher education is among the most viable instruments available for effecting changes being demanded of schools, I share here some ideas about how we might use the current public discourse to our advantage and to the advantage of our students and the young children they teach.

Because teaching elementary grade children has been historically perceived as the bottom rung of the professional ladder, concerns regarding the preparation of pre-elementary grade children has barely ap-

peared on the radar screens of most teachers, parents, and policy-makers. At one time, early childhood teacher educators might have accepted this state of affairs. We could fly low and avoid the fire of criticism aimed at our academic brethren preparing teachers for secondary and elementary schools—but no more. We must find our voices quickly! The fact that early childhood teacher educators and our students have historically maintained relatively low profiles in the current educational debate means that relatively few voices are being raised in protest:

- when presidential candidates call for mandatory testing of young children and for the formal teaching of reading in Head Start.
- when state education departments reshape teacher education regulations, as they have in New York State, to effectively isolate kindergarten.
- when kindergarten becomes a skill and drill environment where children no longer have time for a nap—much less play.

In the years to come, we must learn how to make our voices heard and, in the process, greatly alter the lenses through which young children and their education are viewed. Our protest of such things has to be measured and thoughtful. It has to be made in language that is compelling. It has to be focused on issues that resonate with the public. And, we have to be willing to stick with our protests over time.

What follows is a very personal chronicle of what I have learned about entering the debate regarding educating teachers of young children. These ideas have been formulated primarily through my work as a school principal, department chair, and advisor to

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the National Teacher Policy Institute (NTPI) (a group of 85 teachers in five sites around the country—New York City, Fairfax County, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara County, and the State of Illinois). Teachers of the NTPI have been working together as a network to bring the voices of teachers into educational policy discussions. This group has been conducting action research in classrooms and bringing it together in ways that address issues of critical importance to children, teachers, and schools.

One example of these teachers' work is the recent publication, *What matters most: Supporting student achievement* (National Teacher Policy Institute, 2000). With the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, this document was developed in response to recommendations of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. In this NTPI publication, teachers' research is organized around the Commission's recommendations in ways that demonstrate how policy is translated into practice, and what obstacles and supports teachers encounter as they shape policy to fit local contexts. *What matters most: Supporting student achievement* makes clear that the voice of teachers is critical to the formulation of educational policy. Simultaneous with its publication, NTPI entered into dialogue with the Education Commission of the States (ECS)—the education arm of the National Governors' Conference. Recently, a teacher from NTPI was given a position on the ECS board and NTPI publications are cited in the ECS publication *In pursuit of quality teaching: Five key strategies for policymakers* (Education Commission of the States, 2000). This confluence of events demonstrates our willingness to think national, act national as an organization and to think national, act local as individual teachers working together. As teacher educators we can each have a similar policy impact.

Before Harold Levy became chancellor of the New York City Public Schools, he came to talk with NTPI teachers. He told us a story of the clean up of the Hudson River that has particular relevance to our role as advocates on behalf of children. Mr. Levy described years of unproductive effort by various groups to galvanize public attention to the plight of the polluted Hudson. None were successful—until dead fish started to appear in huge numbers along the river's upper reaches. These dead fish were the clarion call in the battle to save the river. Twenty-five years later, we can swim in the Hudson; we can fish in it; we can live near it; and we treasure what we almost lost. Mr. Levy left us with the admonition to "find a dead fish!" Finding a "dead fish," he suggested, leaves us with a clearer understanding of the process we need to follow to be heard in political debate around education. To be heard he suggested, we should:

- Pick an issue (or issues) we want to focus on.
- Find a transfixing image or metaphor that clearly represents the issue (i.e. the "dead fish.")
- Be heard as many voices speaking to one theme.
- Prepare ourselves for both the front stage and back stage work of policy making. The front stage work is making headlines. The back stage work is educating oneself on the issues, talking with the advisors to politicians, and seizing critical moments such as that opportunity seized by Judi Fenton, an early childhood teacher and member of NTPI, last Spring. Following a speech by Chancellor Levy, Judi stopped the chancellor and told him that NTPI had been working on the issue of mentoring new teachers. The chancellor spent five minutes with Judi that afternoon—five minutes that led to meetings with the chancellor's staff and the voices of teachers in the shaping of the New York City plan.

2. Shaping our own plan of action

As members of the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators, we have to do what the 85 teachers of NTPI have done. We have to begin to speak with a strong voice. We have to begin to speak with clarity and with the data of research and skilled practice to support us in our discussions about what is appropriate for young children and why. Finally, we must become more articulate with policy makers and we must build more productive relationships with those who are not our natural allies.

In a recent article, Berliner (2000) rebutted a number of claims made against teacher education. The manuscript is wonderful to read—but the words in the *Journal of Teacher Education* fall only upon the academic choir. While Berliner's constructive arguments may bolster our personal courage, the real work of rebutting the attacks against teacher education involves carrying our message outside of the church. In addition to working with politicians and the public, we must learn to speak with one voice and engage the support of those who ought to be our colleagues: our partners in higher education, our graduates, classroom teachers, and schools.

3. Our partners in higher education

3.1. Creating alliances with teacher educators at 2- and 4-year colleges

The first and most obvious task before us is to reach out to one another—across the historic divide

between 2- and 4-year colleges (Marshall et al., 2000). *Together*, we are a sizable group. *Together*, we can educate other teacher educators, university faculty, and administrators regarding the critical nature of early childhood teacher education. *Together*, we can, for example, shape a more meaningful educational continuum that focuses on the strengths of both environments for undergraduates. The first two years could more productively support observation/participation with young children and concentration upon the liberal arts. The second two years could pick up the career ladder with focused, theory-driven field experience, completion of the liberal arts, along with possibilities for five-year programs and support for leadership and advocacy. Articulation agreements would be critical in this alliance—agreements arrived at through thoughtful conversation between the faculties of 2- and 4-year institutions rather than by administrators of these institutions acting alone. Similarly, professional organizations of 2- and 4-year colleges should continue to explore ways to expand collaboration in other supportive areas.

3.2. Collaboration within and across colleges/universities

For the most part, early childhood teacher educators have not been effective in arguing our perspective within our own colleges/universities. There is, however, more than low status at issue here. Many of us are at work in institutions that began as normal schools (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988); many of us have inherited and tolerate the indifference and even disdain reserved for teacher education held by our liberal arts brethren (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Cuban, 1993). Few outside of our field understand the delicate balance we maintain as we prepare both young and mature adults for work with infants and young children. Most of us have not, for example, made a cogent case for such mundane essentials as moveable furniture or course scheduling that allows for more personal professional interaction with students over time. Nor have we been effective in using our interactions with students in the field as the legitimate focus of research and scholarship in teacher education. Even fewer teacher educators have entered into discussions of and experiments with new technologies as teaching tools—early childhood teacher educators least of all.

3.3. Collaboration within teacher education departments and schools of education

We need to find ways to collaborate across curricular areas in our own departments and schools of education. New York University and Mills College in

Oakland, California, for example, might serve as models of such collaborative effort.

At NYU, we have just completed a substantive re-shaping of the teacher education curricula that invites collaboration across curricular areas:

- We now have an undergraduate template that is shared by all programs for the first two years. It includes new student seminars, foundation courses, courses in human development, and common field experiences.
- We now have a common core on the graduate level.
- We have benefited from the active participation of our early childhood faculty in discussions of elementary, middle school and high school curricula to the extent that, as a faculty, we have begun to include social studies and English courses as well as math and science in degree offerings at all levels.
- We have engaged in collaboration with the Special Education as well as ESL faculty in all aspects of new program development.

At Mills College, there is a campus school that serves as a site for student teaching placements, observation, and research for faculty and students. There are shared foundations courses participated in by all teacher education students from early childhood through secondary areas. There are retreats at the beginning, middle, and end of the master's programs that bring all of the masters students together as a group of teachers. At these retreats, collaborative curriculum projects are assigned to cohorts of preservice students from across the various teacher education areas. These projects are designed so that new teachers leave their respective programs with an understanding of the range and continuity of thinking regarding a topic like "water" as it could be addressed by teachers from early childhood through high school.

3.4. Collaborations within schools and colleges of education

If we are going to move early childhood into a position of greater prominence, we must think about our role in shaping the profession. We need to ask ourselves some hard questions such as:

- How many of us in the university are working with faculty in educational administration to shape leadership programs for early childhood educators?
- How many of us have participated in educational policy discussions about the professionalization of teaching?

- How many of us have participated in educational policy discussions about the shaping of licensure both locally and nationally—not just for early childhood, but for all teachers?

How many of us are doing the careful work of teaching our students how to work collaboratively with other adults? One of my former students struggled with this issue her entire first year of teaching. While her classroom and her work were being celebrated with monthly visits from dignitaries from across New York City and New York State, it was her relationship with her teaching assistant that worried her most and taught me the importance of better equipping my students for leadership.

3.5. *Creating productive alliances across the university*

In some ways, we are being helped by State Education Departments that now require collaboration between the liberal arts and teacher education faculties. That there may be questionable logic behind such requirements should not stop us from entering into these conversations as advocates for teacher education and for early childhood practitioners. For our colleagues, discussions of good teaching, while rare, can be extraordinarily valuable. Recently, for example, I was asked by one of our Deans to help him to assess his own teaching. The work that we did together became a model for the collegial interaction around teaching that he wanted to support among the faculty of his school. The process also, however, included numerous discussions with this administrator around issues concerning early education.

3.6. *Our graduates*

If we understand the power of our work to reshape practice within the university, as well as schools, we should understand that assessing the outcomes of our work is critical. We must find ways to follow our students into their first years of work. I have done this by setting up a conversation group of juniors, seniors, first, second, and now third- and fourth-year teachers. What I have learned from this group has helped me to reshape the teacher education programs at NYU in ways that have made them more useful to our graduates in their first years of teaching as well as to the students who are preparing to teach (Rust, 1999; Rust & Orland, 2001). Other teacher educators (e.g., Clark, 2001) are also finding productive ways to maintain ties with the field through conversations among and between students and faculty.

3.7. *Schools & teachers*

The care and education of young children is too important for us not to find ways to take our teacher education programs out of the university and into the “real world” of schools. One way of accomplishing this task is to make efforts to encourage promising graduates to become cooperating teachers in our programs. Who, after all, knows our programs and our goals better than our graduates? Another possibility is to move courses into schools as I have done with my research course, “Study of Teaching,” which I co-taught in an elementary school with the school principal and the support of the faculty who opened their classrooms to my student’s weekly observations. We can also engage teachers in teaching courses for our students both in the schools as well as in the university.

Another way to create productive alliances is to situate ourselves in real schools. A good example of such an alliance emerged from the John Muir School in San Francisco where two members of the San Francisco State University faculty wrote a grant that enabled them to work together as co-principals of a troubled elementary school. Together, they forged an alliance with the community that saw the school building itself become the nexus of community conversation. Together, they crafted an alliance between the school and the university that re-shaped and invigorated the school’s educational program by bringing 30 master’s interns into the building—two to a classroom. Further, rather than losing their jobs, teachers at this school actually got help. Two of the teachers taught courses for the student teachers in the building at the end of the day. Thus, children saw their teachers going to school. Teachers became part of the teacher education process, and the school and the university shared in a unique and mutually beneficial relationship in which both maintained their identity while collaborating with a shared purpose—the care and education of children and their teachers.

4. Conclusion

Teacher education is at a critical juncture where we may be in serious danger of losing control of the profession as has happened in England where teacher education has moved from the university to local education authorities. Given its traditionally low status, early childhood teacher education may be particularly vulnerable. Let us join together as early childhood teacher educators who are willing and able to place ourselves strategically in the current debate about children, schools, and education. Clearly, if we desire a more competent and caring citizenry for

tomorrow, we must begin to work together now to make certain that a more professionally responsible plan for educating teachers of young children emerges today. The help and support of all is needed to create this plan. We will have to overcome a variety of obstacles—not the least of which is the apparent indifference of far too many members of our own profession. The care and education of young children is too important for us not to seize this moment to build new alliances designed to bring the perspective of responsible early childhood educators into the policy discourse around schools and schooling.

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