

21st-Century



Teacher Education

Ed schools **don't** give teachers the tools they need

by KATE WALSH

For almost as long as there have been institutions dedicated to the preparation of new teachers, the endeavor has come in for criticism. Teacher education has long struggled both to professionalize and to fully integrate itself into mainstream academia. At the core of this struggle was a perception that there was no body of specialized knowledge for teaching that justified specialized training.

Over the last few decades, criticism of teacher preparation has shifted away from a largely academic debate to the troubling performance of American students. Shocked by teacher education's refusal to train teachers to use scientifically based reading methods, Reid Lyon, who headed a 30-year study at the National Institutes of Health of how people best learn to read, once stated, "If there was any piece of legislation that I could pass it would be to blow up colleges of education." The suggestion was repeated in a 2009 speech by Craig Barrett, the former chair of Intel Corporation, who had been working to improve math and science education. Arne Duncan, the Obama administration's secretary of education, having previously served as schools superintendent in Chicago, one of the nation's most troubled school districts, gave back-to-back speeches early in his tenure decrying the state of the field: "By almost any standard, many if not most of the nation's 1,450 schools, colleges, and departments of education are doing a mediocre job of preparing teachers for the realities of the 21st-century classroom," and "America's university-based teacher preparation programs need revolutionary change, not evolutionary thinking."

An occasional insider has joined the fray. Arthur Levine, former dean of what many consider to be the preeminent teacher-preparation program, Teachers College, Columbia University, has been savage in his criticism: "Teacher education is the Dodge City of the education world. Like the fabled Wild West town, it is unruly and disordered," he wrote in 2006. He then swiftly abandoned his involvement with traditional teacher preparation altogether, starting up his own alternative pathway to teaching, the Woodrow Wilson fellowships.

At the time, his remarks were viewed as mutinous by many of his colleagues, particularly his view that the primary accrediting body for teacher education, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), ought to be scrapped. Several years later, insiders conceded that Levine had been right. Accreditation is now being revamped under a new name, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

The Perspective of Teacher Educators

Almost all teacher educators acknowledge that the field has deep problems, but their concern has seldom been about the issues raised by external critics such as lack of selectivity, an imbalance between content and pedagogy, or the lack of value delivered. These differences aren't always recognized because the insider critiques often *sound* a lot like the external critiques. In reality, insiders are more concerned about the chaos in the field.

The core of insider complaints is not that the profession is marching in the wrong direction, as some believe, but that too many of its foot soldiers are out of step, inadequately provisioned, and carrying the wrong weapons. This disarray is not surprising, given that the training takes place at 1,450 higher-education institutions in the United States, each of which houses anywhere from three to seven teacher-preparation programs. Fewer than half of these institutions have earned national accreditation—an anomaly not found in other professions—leaving the rest answerable to no one.

The most revealing insight into what teacher educators believe to be wrong or right about the field is a lengthy 2006 volume published by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), *Studying Teacher Education*. It contains contributions from 15 prominent deans and education professors and was intended to provide “balanced, thorough, and unapologetically honest descriptions of the state of research on particular topics in teacher education.” It lives up to that billing. First, the volume demonstrates



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—Arne Duncan

the paucity of credible research that would support the current practices of traditional teacher education, across all of its many functions, including foundations courses, arts and sciences courses, field experiences, and pedagogical approaches, as well as how current practice prepares candidates to teach diverse populations and special education students. More intriguing, however, is the contributors’ examination of the dramatic evolution of the mission of teacher education over the last 50 years, in ways that have certainly been poorly understood by anyone outside the profession.

Studying Teacher Education explains the disconnect between what teacher educators believe is the right way to prepare a new teacher and the unhappy K–12 schools on the receiving end of that effort. It happens that the job of teacher educators is not to *train* the next generation of teachers but to *prepare* them.

Far beyond Semantics

Though those two terms—train and prepare—appear to be interchangeable, they are not. This word choice is a deliberate one on the part of teacher education (“training” is *never* used) and signals a significant shift in the field over the last three or four decades. While few would disagree that new teachers generally get very little practical training before they enter the classroom, the reasons are profoundly misunderstood. It is not, as many have assumed, because of ideological resistance to various teaching methods. And it is not that teacher educators don’t understand the realities of the 21st-century classroom and need to come down from their ivory tower.

It is because *training* a teacher is viewed (if the AERA volume is accurate in its summation) as “an oversimplification of teaching and learning, ignoring its dynamic, social and moral aspects.” This evolution from a training purpose to a preparation purpose started in the 1970s and is described in detail by the AERA volume co-editor and Boston College education professor Marilyn Cochran-Smith, who dismisses training as a “technical transmission activity.”

In 2012, the Thomas B. Fordham Institute surveyed teacher educators, finding substantial evidence that most teacher educators do not see their role, at least not their primary role, to be a trainer of teachers. For example, just 37 percent responded that it was an “absolutely essential” feature of their job to develop “teachers who maintain discipline and order in the classroom.”

The Philosophy behind Teacher Formation

Harking back perhaps to teacher education’s 19th-century ecclesiastical origins, its mission has shifted away from the medical model of training doctors to professional *formation*. The function of teacher education is to launch the candidate on a lifelong path of *learning*, distinct from *knowing*, as actual knowledge is perceived as too fluid to be achievable. In the course of a teacher’s preparation, prejudices and errant assumptions must be confronted and expunged, with particular emphasis on those related to race, class, language, and culture. This improbable feat, not unlike the transformation of Pinocchio from puppet to real boy, is accomplished as candidates reveal their feelings and attitudes through abundant in-class dialogue and by keeping a journal. From these activities is born each teacher’s unique philosophy of teaching and learning.

There is also a strong social-justice component to teacher education, with teachers cast as “activists committed to diminishing the inequities of American society.” That vision of a teacher is seen by a considerable fraction of teacher educators (although not all) as more important than preparing a teacher to be an effective instructor. This view of a teacher’s role as transformational is not wrong, as teachers often serve as the means by which children overcome challenges inherent in their backgrounds. But it is one that is often taken to absurd extremes in practice. For example, a textbook used in a math course for elementary school teachers is entitled *Social Justice through Mathematics*, which explains why the view is so often disparaged.



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—American Education Research Association

Find Your Own Method

Nowhere is the chasm between the two visions of teacher education—training versus formation—clearer than in the demise of the traditional methods course. The public, and policymakers who require such courses in regulations governing teacher education, may assume that when a teacher takes a methods course, it is to learn the best methods for teaching certain subject matter. That view, we are told in the AERA volume, is for the most part an anachronism. The current view, state professors Renee T. Clift and Patricia Brady, is that “A methods course is seldom defined as a class that transmits information about methods of instruction and ends with a final exam. [They] are seen as complex sites in which instructors work simultaneously with prospective teachers on beliefs, teaching practices and creation of identities—their students’ and their own.”

The statement reveals just how far afield teacher education has traveled from its training purposes. It is hard not to suspect that the ambiguity in such language as the “creation of identities” is purposeful, because if a class fails to meet such objectives, no one would be the wiser.

The shift away from training to formation has had one immediate and indisputable outcome: the onus of a teacher’s training has shifted from the teacher *educators* to the teacher *candidates*. What remains of the teacher educator’s purpose is only to build the “capacity” of the candidate to be able to make seasoned professional judgments. Figuring out what actually to do falls

entirely on the candidate.

Here is the guidance provided to student teachers at a large public university in New York:

In addition to establishing the norm for your level, you must, after determining your year-end goals, break down all that you will teach into manageable lessons. While so much of this is something you learn on the job, a great measure of it must be inside you, or you must be able to find it in a resource. This means that if you do not know the content of a grade level, or if you

do not know how to prepare a lesson plan, or if you do not know how to do whatever is expected of you, it is your responsibility to find out how to do these things. Your university preparation is not intended to address every conceivable aspect of teaching.

Do not be surprised if your Cooperating Teacher is helpful but suggests you find out the “how to” on your own. Your Cooperating Teacher knows the value of owning your way into your teaching style.

As this frank (and substantively representative) example indicates, teacher candidates who are typically 21 or 22 years of age are asked to carry quite a heavy burden. The new teacher is effectively denied the wisdom, experience, and solid research that might make all the difference when confronting a classroom of students for the first time.

Nowhere is the abdication of training truer or more harmful than in the course work elementary teacher candidates take in reading instruction. It is commonly assumed that teacher educators opt not to train candidates in scientifically based reading instruction, instead “training” them in “whole language” methods. Actually, no such training occurs, as whole language methods require no training. Whole language is not an instructional method that a teacher might learn to apply, but merely a theory (flawed at that) based on the premise that learning to read is a “natural” process. It is no coincidence then that the whole-language approach tracks nicely with a philosophy of teacher education in which technical training is disparaged.

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) has reviewed hundreds of syllabi from reading programs at more than 800 institutions across the country. What these programs most often teach is not to adopt the whole language approach but that the candidate should develop her *own* approach to teaching reading, based on exposure to various philosophies and approaches, none more valid than any other.

Academic Freedom’s Downside

The vilification of the training model of teacher education has been compounded by the principle of academic freedom run amok. The way that academic freedom is supposed to work is that individual professors are given license to decide what topics to teach, but not when evidentiary support for those topics is lacking.

Academic freedom only works if a field is willing to police itself on what constitutes acceptable content, which has yet to occur in the field of teacher education. Further, though case law surrounding academic freedom issues has clearly established that higher-education leadership can still require a professor to teach certain topics, overly expansive faculty contracts have led to a different outcome. Most faculty contracts contain language modeled on the American Association of University Professors’ (AAUP) *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*. Contractual promises are legally binding, and AAUP’s policy on academic freedom holds that professors should have complete freedom to teach any topic, other than those that “suggest disciplinary incompetence.” *Ideas are wrong only if they are rejected by an academic field*, not if they lack experimental support. In other words, unless a faculty were to meet and decide what topics can or cannot be taught, individual professors are left to teach what they want.

What Should Teachers Learn?

In recent years, the primary focus of states has been, What should students learn? One result has been the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which have at this writing been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia. The CCSS make all the more pressing the need to train teachers to teach differently than they themselves were likely taught. Absolutely essential is the effective training of all candidates in necessary pedagogical tools and techniques *before* they enter the classroom:

- **Early reading.** We have the specific knowledge that would allow all but a small percentage of children to read. If



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we applied that knowledge systematically, we could reduce reading failure from some 30 percent to less than 5 percent.

- **The Common Core and mathematics.** As part of their own training, elementary teachers will have had to develop a fluid and conceptual understanding of numbers systems in all of their representations, something that we estimate is not currently happening in 75 percent of teacher education programs.

- **The Common Core and English language arts.** Teachers will have to adopt new protocols that consider a host of factors, including the careful selection of appropriately complex texts (with as much attention to nonfiction as to fiction), the delivery of a lesson, appropriate classroom activities, as well as the assignments that students are given. Ideally, new teachers should have practiced these protocols *before* they enter the classroom for the first time.

- **Classroom management.** Experience isn't the only way to acquire classroom management skills; there are specific skills and techniques that can be taught and practiced to mastery. Behaviorists have contributed much of this research, but most of teacher education holds this body of work in disdain. The result is that teacher candidates are deprived of useful knowledge such as the clear principle that students need to hear a lot more praise than criticism if we are to maximize their engagement. Useful guidance can also be gleaned from the practices of effective teachers, for example, the 49 techniques recently set down by Doug Lemov in *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College*, a book that serves as the antithesis of what most institutions espouse.

- **Cognitive psychology.** Understanding how individuals acquire expertise and how memory works would be tremendously helpful for new teachers, but such topics are largely absent in the current preparation model.

- **Assessment.** Assessment is playing an increasingly important role (in ways both good and bad), and teachers need to understand that role. NCTQ's study of this issue found that few schools are providing the most basic instruction on assessment.

Moving the Higher Ed Mountain

The challenge then is to find ways to motivate institutions to change in the direction of effective training. This is a battle that will be fought on many fronts, but the critical change must come in the incentives that drive the market for new teachers. Applying a variety of metrics to program performance will create the information consumers need to make different decisions.

Currently, consumers of teacher education, both aspiring teachers and school districts, do not know which institutions are doing a great job and which are not. The binary and quite opaque approach of accrediting bodies, in which an institution earns a thumbs-up or -down, does not provide information that consumers can easily access or use. In any marketplace, consumers will be drawn to higher-quality products if they can determine key product features. This is true even of those aspiring teachers who are inclined to choose an institution within 50 miles of where they went to high school. One reason teachers may stay so close to home is that there is no objective measure of program quality or performance that might provide an incentive to relocate. That need not be the case. NCTQ is rating the quality of individual teacher-preparation programs using a set of measurable, objective standards that reflect what public school educators view as important attributes in new teachers.

The *NCTQ Teacher Prep Review*, slated for initial release in June 2013, is rating teacher-preparation programs across the country. By examining the fundamental requirements of each program—admissions standards, course requirements, coverage of essential content, preparation in the CCSS, how the student teaching program operates, instruction in classroom management and lesson planning, and how teacher candidates are judged ready for the classroom—the *Review* will capture the information that any consumer of these programs would want to see, including aspiring teachers and school districts looking to hire the best teachers. The *Review* also looks at the degree to which programs track outcomes in an effort to



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improve their programs and whether there are student achievement data that reflect the average effectiveness of an institution's graduates.

The goal for the review is to draw more "customers" toward the best teacher-prep programs and away from weaker programs, igniting reforms in the field that have long been sought but so far remain elusive. (See the NCTQ website, nctq.org, for more information.)

Engaging the consumers of teacher-preparation programs, in particular, aspiring teachers and school districts, offers certain advantages. For one, change would not depend on policymakers making the tough calls that the powerful higher-education lobby works hard to prevent. Across the country, only 8 out of 1,450 institutions were most recently identified by their states as low performing. Even these are likely to spend only a few years under the threat of probation before being returned to healthy status. It seems implausible that policymakers will take on the field's dysfunction in the depth that is likely required.

For example, contrary to expectations that Louisiana would use the definitive data it has been collecting from its value-added examination of teacher-preparation programs for over a decade, it has yet to withhold approval from any program, believing instead that programs will choose to improve on their own without the state's interference. It has only held one program accountable for its consistently low performance by reducing the number of new teacher candidates that the institution could admit. This is a sensible response, but one that should likely be applied to a lot more programs than simply the single worst.

Many states are moving in the same direction as Louisiana, employing value-added data, but none have yet figured out how to make their findings transparent and accessible to the public. There are also some statistical problems that will preclude all but the larger programs from ever being reliably rated. As a strategy unto itself, value added has limitations, but it could be a key component in any set of performance metrics. More promising is the possibility



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of tracing teacher evaluation ratings back to the institution, particularly in states that have embraced more rigorous evaluation systems.

Good Policymaking Still Has a Role

Policymakers can make a big difference to the quality of teacher preparation. Here's how:

- **Raise admissions standards.** As Illinois has recently done, states should require that programs admit only students in the top half of their class.
- **Make student teaching meaningful.** Teacher candidates need to learn from the best. States should follow Indiana and Tennessee's lead and require that student teachers are only placed with mentor teachers of demonstrated effectiveness.
- **Use performance-based funding.** Ten states make funding to public institutions of higher education contingent on meeting key outcomes. None has yet used this tool to improve teacher preparation programs; it's time to try.
- **Align teacher supply with what schools actually need.** Programs routinely produce twice as many elementary teachers as will be hired. States should cap the number of licenses in areas of oversupply and lower tuition for high-need areas such as special education and STEM fields.
- **Inspection.** Take a page from the playbook of the United Kingdom and establish high-stakes, on-the-ground inspections of institutions. Unlike current on-site visits conducted by states

and accrediting agencies, these would be much more public and would be done by trained former Pre-K-12 school leaders and teachers. Aspiring teachers in the U.K. review the results of these inspections, and policymakers actually limit slots at poor performing programs.

All of these strategies establish an important and unambiguous principle: teacher education exists to serve the needs of Pre-K-12 schools and public financial support should depend on its ability to do so.

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