

LIFE ON THE MARGINS

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One puzzle about the politics of teacher education in the United States is that teacher educators exert so little influence in this arena.¹ On the face of it, you would think that we would take a leading role in setting policy for teacher education and informing the public alike about the issues in this field. After all, we are the ones who run the programs that prepare teachers and who carry out the research that informs these programs. But things have not worked out the way we would have liked. We offer a lot of advice about teaching, learning, and learning to teach, but most of it is easily shrugged off.

During the past 100 years, our most consistent piece of advice has been that teaching should become more progressive. Drawing inspiration from John Dewey and William H. Kilpatrick, we have argued relentlessly for a kind of teaching that is child centered; that fosters learning to learn instead of acquiring a fixed body of knowledge; that engages the interests of the whole child in a process of personal discovery; that marshals the activity of the child in self-directed, cross-disciplinary projects; and that promotes a democratic community in the classroom.

In one way, at least, we have been quite successful in pushing this progressive agenda, because our vision has come to provide the language with which Americans talk about education. As Lawrence Cremin (1961, p. 328) pointed out in his classic history of progressive education, by the 1950s, American educators in general came to talk about their field using phrases such as *the whole child*, *social and emotional growth*, *intrinsic motivation*, *teaching children not subjects*, and *real life experiences*. And today we find that teacher educators, teachers, administrators, and educational policy makers continue to use this kind of progressive language.

However, although progressive rhetoric is everywhere, progressive practice is much harder to find. Ellen Lagemann (1989) has argued this point with admirable precision: In the contest during the 20th century regarding who would have the greatest impact on the practice of teachers in schools, "Edward L. Thorndike won and John Dewey lost" (p. 145). Others agree. In his extensive study of 1,000 American classrooms, John Goodlad (1983) found that in most of these classrooms pedagogy was teacher centered, learning was passive, and control was centralized. Larry Cuban's (1993) historical examination of *How Teachers Taught* during the early and middle parts of the century finds that teaching practices at best displayed a hybrid of progressive and traditional practices, that these hybrids drew primarily on the more formalistic and easily adapted elements of progressivism, and that they were largely confined to the lower grades. Although many critics—such as Jeanne Chall (2000), the Fordham Foundation (Public Agenda, 1997), and the Manhattan Institute (Barnes, 2002)—have argued that the progressivism of teacher educators has succeeded in ruining American schools, the actual evidence they present shows the dominance of progressivism over teacher talk rather than teacher practice.

These days, we in teacher education are more likely to use the term *constructivism* instead of *progressivism* (Richardson, 2003), but we mean the same thing. However, although we are as committed to the progressive agenda as we were in the past, educational policy is moving in the opposite direction. Instead of reforms that promote child centeredness and inquiry learning, we have the standards movement, with its stress on strict curriculum guidelines and teach-

ing to the test. Instead of efforts that would reinforce teacher education programs for inquiry learning (as urged by pro-teacher education organizations such as National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium, and National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education), we have reforms that sidestep these programs by encouraging alternative routes into teaching.

Why have we teacher educators been so ineffective at shaping policy in our own domain? Let us consider a few of the more prominent reasons.

WE OCCUPY A LOWLY STATUS

One problem is that teacher education programs, and the schools of education in which they are located, occupy a lowly status in the hierarchy of higher education. We get very little respect from a wide array of interested parties: colleagues and students across campus, school teachers, administrators, policy makers, and the public at large. Our own students and graduates speak ill of us. There are books about us with inflammatory titles, such as *The Miseducation of American Teachers* (Koerner, 1963) and *Ed School Follies* (Kramer, 1991). There is ridicule from writers such as Thomas Sowell (1993) and E. D. Hirsch Jr. (1996). We even attack ourselves, whether in the form of a frontal assault such as the Holmes Group's (1995) *Tomorrow's Schools of Education* or a glancing blow such as the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future's (1996) *What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*.

Of course, to say that we lack influence because we lack status is something of a tautology. One of the ways we know our status is low is that our influence is low. In addition, influence and status are mutually reinforcing. On the issue of identifying the roots of our low status, there is some disagreement.

For our critics—which is to say, for most people—we teacher educators have resoundingly earned our ill repute by doing our jobs so badly. From this perspective, status is something you win or lose in the court of public opinion based on your actions: People examine the evidence,

weigh the merits of the case, and levy a judgment. At least, that is what you hear from critics of teacher education such as Hirsch (1996), Diane Ravitch (2000), Emily Feistritzer and the National Center for Educational Information (www.ncei.com), and many of the participants at a recent conference at the American Enterprise Institute (2003) titled "Can Education Schools Be Saved?"

In some ways, we in teacher education have earned the scorn heaped on us. Many, maybe most, of our programs are academically undemanding and intellectually unstimulating. Much of our research is either lacking validity or lacking significance. The teachers we send into the classroom are not exactly producing great advances in student learning, especially for students who do not bring a broad array of social and cultural advantages with them into the classroom.

However, a major part of our status problem comes from particular historical contingencies (bad luck) and sociological associations (bad company). Historically, teacher education had the bad luck to arrive in higher education after all the top positions were already taken. Teacher education started in the 19th century in normal schools, which were originally high school level institutions devoted exclusively to training teachers. By the start of the 20th century, by popular demand, they were gradually evolving into teacher colleges offering a wide array of programs in addition to teacher education. At the same time, existing universities began to add small programs in pedagogy, aimed mostly at high school teachers and administrators. During the course of the 20th century, the former normal schools gradually evolved from teacher colleges into general-purpose state colleges and finally regional state universities, with teacher education now confined within a school or college of education. (Pedagogy departments at the older universities also developed into education schools.) As faculty members in late-developing universities (and to a much smaller extent, as late-arriving faculty in older universities), teacher educators carried the odor of the parvenu. Above them on the institutional status ladder were the tiers of higher education insti-

tutions that preceded them in time: the ivies arising in the 17th and 18th centuries, the flagship state universities in the early and mid-19th century, and the land grant universities in the mid-to-late 19th century. And above them within each university were all the disciplines and professional programs that were already well established before the arrival of education.

Teacher education has also suffered from another status problem, which derives from the sociology of teaching. School teaching, as we are all too well aware, carries a load of low-status associations. It is the largest and least selective of the professions; it focuses its efforts on a low-status clientele, children; it has been seen generally as women's work; and it draws the bulk of its practitioners from the working class and lower middle class. Professions that are more selective, connected to higher status clients, traditionally male, and prone to draw upper-middle-class students enjoy considerably higher esteem within society, as do the faculty in their professional schools within the university.

There is nothing fair about either the historical process or sociological associations that afflict teacher education. These attributes were assigned to us rather than earned by us. But we still have to live with the consequences—one of which is that people find it easy to dismiss our expertise and, thus, to ignore our contributions to the political debate about teacher education.

WE ARE ENGAGED IN A DIFFICULT PRACTICE THAT LOOKS EASY

Another factor that undermines our influence in the politics of teacher education is a simple paradox about our practice as teacher educators: Teaching (and by extension, teaching people how to teach) is an extraordinarily difficult form of professional practice that looks easy.² Consider some of the elements that make it so difficult for people to learn how to teach effectively.

First, teachers can succeed only by convincing students to cooperate with them; or to put it another way, students learn only if they are motivated to do so. Motivating student compliance with the teacher's lesson plan is not easy, especially when the immediate benefits of

learning are not apparent to the student. A teacher cannot fix the educational problems of students in their sleep the way that a surgeon can fix the medical problems of patients under anesthesia.

Second, students are in the classroom against their will. They are compelled by truancy laws, the job market, and social custom to spend long days in study for at least 12 years of their lives. This makes it both natural and likely that large numbers of students will actively resist learning as an unfair intrusion on their lives.

Third, teaching involves a complex emotional relationship with students. Because student compliance is essential for a teacher's success and because student resistance to learning is to be expected, a teacher needs to work hard to establish personal ties with students to encourage them to go along with her or his pedagogical project. If the students respect and like the teacher, they are more likely to try to please the teacher by learning what she or he is teaching. But establishing a teacher persona that is both likable and professional is a perilously complicated task.

Fourth, teachers have to practice their profession under conditions of isolation from fellow practitioners. The self-contained classroom traps the teacher with a large number of students, leaving the teacher to her or his own devices for figuring out how to manage this unruly crew of unwilling learners.

Fifth, teachers have to function with a degree of uncertainty that is greater than any other profession. There is no set of standards for professional practice that operates reliably in promoting learning for most students. There is no way to reduce the amazing complexity of teaching, which is shaped by a huge number of variables that affect student learning, including everything from issues of time and place to issues of person and position. There is uncertainty about how to measure the effects of teaching, because the desired outcomes are so complex and their emergence may take a long period of time. There is, in fact, uncertainty about what the desired outcomes are, because the goals of education are constantly being debated and contradictory goals are embedded within the institu-

tion itself. Finally, there is even uncertainty about who the client is, because successful teachers must simultaneously meet the needs and demands of students, parents, and community—who all have a legitimate stake in education but who may have sharply different visions of what constitutes educational success.

Unfortunately, however, neither teachers nor teacher educators get credit for the difficult circumstances under which they labor. To most people who have not taught—citizens, parents, and prospective teachers—teaching looks easy.

One reason for this is that people think they know all about teaching because as students they engaged in 12 years of what Lortie (1975) called an “apprenticeship of observation.” The view of teaching they get from the little seats in the classroom is deceptively simple. It looks like a set of routines, a process of maintaining order, a matter of nature and personality. Invisible is all the planning, decision making, moment-to-moment adjustment to student actions, and professional reflection.

Another reason school teaching looks easy is that the skills that teachers seek to instill in students are part of the ordinary skill set of the educated adult. The subject matter of schooling does not look like obscure or sophisticated stuff and, therefore, teachers and teacher educators do not get much credit for what they know. If anyone does get such credit, it is the professors across campus who own those subjects and whose depth of expertise in these areas is seen as more credible. What is invisible, of course, is a second layer of expertise that is distinct to the teacher and teacher educator—the knowledge about how to teach particular subjects to particular students.

One last thing about teaching and teacher education that makes them look easy is this: Whereas most professionals rent their expertise to their clients, teachers freely give theirs away. The signal that education has succeeded appears when students no longer need the teacher, when they can continue to learn on their own (Fenstermacher, 1990). You have to keep going back for help to your lawyer or doctor or accountant, but at a certain point in your educational development, you can turn your

back on your teacher for good. That is a healthy thing, but it has the side effect of discounting the full extent of the contribution that teachers and teacher educators make to the future accomplishments of their students.

WE ARE TOO PREDICTABLE

Another reason that we do not have much influence in the politics of teacher education is that we are too predictable. In part, people do not ask us what we think, and they do not anxiously await our next contribution to the discussion, because they know what we are going to say. As we have done for the past 100 years, we are going to talk, at length, yet again, about progressivism. We are going to argue that teaching needs to be more child centered, inquiry based, and collaborative; that learning should be more authentic, engaged, and individualized; that schools should focus more on developing social and cognitive processes for facilitating student-initiated learning; and that schools should focus less on developing structures for the delivery of knowledge as well as on developing assessments of how well students acquired this knowledge. Often this advice has real merit. A standards-based school system needs to worry, as we do, about the possible consequences for student engagement and long-term learning. But our very predictability makes our comments irrelevant because they do not seem directly responsive to the particular needs and contexts and issues of the conversation at hand. We do not seem to be listening to the concerns of people around us, so why should they listen to us?

So we need to lighten up on our relentless pursuit of the constructivist ideal, and we need to consider the pragmatic situation in which both teachers and teacher educators have to function. We send teachers into the classroom armed with progressive rhetoric and imbued with the constructivist spirit, but they immediately have to adapt to the realities of teaching in today’s schools: a school system characterized by bureaucracy, mandated curricula, and high-stakes tests and a student body characterized by radical differences in economic, social, and cultural capital. We should feel lucky that they

engage in the kind of hybrid teaching practices that Cuban (1993) talked about, a little progressivism and a lot of traditionalism. We also need to recognize the hybrid nature of the real work we do in our own professional practice as teacher educators. We teach constructivist ideology to our students, but at the same time we prepare them to enter a structure of schooling that is anything but constructivist. We often frame our research with regard to constructivist principles, but most of this research is profoundly shaped by the structure of research funding, which encourages studies that will help make the existing system run a little more efficiently. In short, it is time to get off our high horse. Dewey lost. Let us make the best with what we have got.

WE ARE SEEN AS DEFENDERS OF THE SYSTEM

One final irony about our lack of influence in the politics of teacher education is that in the public mind—despite all of our railing against the traditional system of schooling—we are seen as inveterate defenders of the status quo in public education. We see ourselves as reformers who, despite all the evidence that our efforts have been to little avail during the past 100 years, continue to press for adoption of the full constructivist program for American schools. But in the current politics of education, we come across as the diehards of the education establishment, zealously fending off the efforts by real reformers to transform an obviously failing system of education.

When people call into question the quality and effectiveness of teaching, our reflex is to call this teacher bashing; and we respond by pointing out how difficult teaching is under current conditions and how well teachers do in spite of everything. When people call for greater school choice—arguing that choice can promote the improvement or displacement of failing schools and that choice can provide poor minority families with the kinds of options that are currently limited to well-to-do Whites—our reflex is to call this an attack on public education; and we respond by extolling the community public school as the last bulwark of civic virtue in a market-crazy society. When people call for

alternative routes into teaching, to draw more talented people into the profession and to bypass teacher education programs that often produce drones, our reflex is to berate this as an effort to undermine teacher professionalism; and we respond by arguing vociferously in support of existing programs of teacher education, justifying our own role as gatekeeper to the profession.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that we have little influence in the current politics of teaching and teacher education. Seen as mere partisans, trying to protect our own turf and our own stake in the status quo, we may be lucky to be considered merely irrelevant. To many critics, we are a central part of the problem of public education and, thus, to them a sensible solution to this problem may be to require our removal. We are in the unlovely position of being seen both as pillars of the establishment and as zealots of the constructivist insurrection and, thus, we find ourselves defending the indefensible while also demanding the unrealizable. It might not be a bad idea to back off a couple of steps from both of these positions. We bring a lot of valuable expertise to the debate about schools, but few people will listen to us until we shore up our credibility.

NOTES

1. This article draws on arguments from my book, *The Trouble With Ed Schools* (Labaree, 2004).

2. This section draws on arguments developed in an earlier article I wrote for the *Journal of Teacher Education* (Labaree, 2000).

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