

# Teacher Education: Repair, Reform, or Revolution?

**George W. Denmark**

"EDUCATION is beyond repair! What is needed is radical reform. . . . Today, the alternative to reform is revolution."<sup>1</sup> Strong words, especially as they come not from some isolated critic outside of the educational establishment but from the report of a distinguished task force of educators commissioned by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Strong, perhaps, but straight to the point.

The experience of the past decade should make it clear to all that the demands upon America's schools have resulted in stresses requiring more than the occasional oiling of the squeaky wheel or the frustrated kick that constitutes the home repair technology familiar to most of us. Hopefully, these challenges can be met short of revolution, with its accompanying violent rejection of our system of education and the possible transfer of power to other agencies and personnel with little commitment to our democratic traditions.

What is true for American education in general is true in particular for teacher education. The quality and character of our elementary and secondary schools are depen-

dent largely upon the quality and character of the teachers who staff them. The teachers, in turn, strongly reflect the strengths and shortcomings of the colleges that recruit them and provide initial preparation, the school systems that employ them and continue their training, and the professional organizations that supplement such formal training through a broad range of activities. If schools must change to meet the challenges of our times, the education of teachers must change as well. Recognition of the need for radical reform in both schools and teacher preparation need not diminish our regard for the splendid heritage of either. Instead, reforming our institutions to meet our nation's needs can be viewed as a reflection of the special genius claimed for a democratic society.

What are the weaknesses in the education of American teachers which demand basic reform or threaten revolution?

1. *Inadequacies and irrelevance of much that presently constitutes the general studies or liberal education component.* In terms of both content and process, general studies often fail to provide students with opportunities to experience what is involved in decision making and choice, the establishment of meaning, the use of evidence and

<sup>1</sup> *Teachers for the Real World.* Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1969. p. 9.

logic, and collaboration toward proximate goals. Instead, they afford narrow, formalized introductions to a string of disconnected subjects, superficially considered through emphasis upon nomenclature, classification systems, or the manipulation of paraphernalia. Separation of information and the problems and issues to which it applies unfortunately still characterizes segments of American higher education. This dichotomy represents a serious shortcoming in the education of any college student. For the prospective teacher it is of critical importance, for he will himself soon become an agent of general education in the elementary or secondary school and likely perpetuate the splintering of knowledge and the gap between ideas and action.

Reexamination of the traditional separation of liberal or general studies from professional studies is long overdue. The career concerns of students can motivate liberal studies and provide an avenue for understanding important concepts. And liberal education can invest professional studies with more personal and humane qualities.

2. *The hostile academic atmosphere in which teacher education is conducted.* Some colleges and universities have long been so hostile and grudging toward teacher education that many college students are negatively inclined toward their professional studies before even commencing them. Certain college professors feel no qualms about advising able students that they would be "wasting" their talents by going into preparation for elementary or secondary teaching. Although the financial survival of many small colleges is dependent upon their programs and enrollments in teacher education, budget allocations seldom reflect this, and priorities for staff and facilities point elsewhere.

Little wonder that James Stone describes teacher education as a "stepchild," unwanted by the colleges,<sup>2</sup> and Hobert Burns urges that we ". . . consider transferring much of the responsibility from colleges and universities to the public schools" since "many colleges,

perhaps even most, have not taken seriously the obligation to teacher education. . . ." <sup>3</sup>

3. *Lack of conceptual frameworks for teacher education.* Without the identification of some unifying theories or conceptual frameworks for structuring teacher education, most of our efforts at improvement result in mere "tinkering." An appropriate balance must be struck between theory and practice. Adequate recognition must be given to the broad range of objectives in teacher preparation from fundamental beginning skills to a body of systematized knowledge that permits teachers to become analysts and diagnosticians of the teaching-learning process—to become teacher-scholars.

We have been prone too often to regard the almost infinite number of minor variations from program to program as positive evidence of institutional initiative and concern for individuality. Instead, such variations are more likely to represent evidence of grossly inadequate attention to basic principles and of breakdowns in the communication process among professionals across institutional and sometimes even departmental boundary lines.

4. *Simplistic views of teaching and teacher education.* "Teachers should be taught as they are expected to teach." "What does it matter how much a person knows of a subject if he can't build an effective relationship with children?" The first oft-repeated viewpoint sounds appealing until one begins to reflect on the differences in experience level, motivation, capacity to handle abstractions, etc., between kindergartners and doctoral students. Few thoughtful persons would quarrel over the importance of teaching and relating to children. Need we choose, however, between that ability and such other important qualities as a broad concept of the world, ability to distinguish fact from opinion, or the capacity to pose open rather than closed structure questions which elicit higher order thinking among students? Teaching

<sup>2</sup> James C. Stone. *Breakthrough in Teacher Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Hobert Burns. "Teacher Education Programs—Their Structure and Flexibility." NDEA *Special Bulletin*, December 1967. In: *Ibid.*, pp. 187-88.

is a complex, demanding profession which is demeaned by those who would suggest that *only* affection for children or subject matter knowledge or specific teaching skills are sufficient. All these and more are necessary for the effective teacher.

Another evidence of a simplistic approach in teacher education is the almost childlike faith some have evinced in the efficacy of laboratory experiences. Whatever the scope, quality, duration, and structure of such experiences, some persons have equated improved teacher education with more of these and less of whatever else was being done. But unplanned laboratory experiences can turn out to be little more than "rubbernecking" or wasteful repetition of a narrow band of teaching behavior and student response sandwiched between large slices of coming and going.

5. *Inadequate interlacing of theoretical and practical study.* Effective teachers interpret classroom events by means of theoretical knowledge but gain an appreciation of the significance of key concepts as they see them applied in school situations. It is essential, therefore, that teacher preparation programs give attention to each and to their appropriate integration.

Criticism continues that teacher education is too theoretical. Perhaps, to the contrary, it may not be *sufficiently* theoretical. Simply because training programs fail to reflect reality adequately does not *per se* make them too theoretical. Rather they may only be out of touch with reality—an equally serious but very different problem. Much of what currently passes for theory is simply outdated specific knowledge—for which there should be little room in the teacher education curriculum.

Improved opportunities to see teaching ideas in action and thus better understand them is highly important. But there is no magic in field experience. It is not meaningful simply because it is "out there." Rather, it is meaningful as it is carefully planned, structured, interpreted, and linked with theoretical or foundational studies. Contact with reality without the perspective of theory

fosters adjustment to what *is* rather than stimulating realization of what *could be*. Beginning teachers must be able to survive in the classroom as it is, but if education is to improve—a matter we judge to be imperative—they must also have the vision of its potentialities and the skills to alter its course.

The development of educational media makes possible a linking of theoretical knowledge with real situations which illustrate its use. As pointed out in *Teachers for the Real World*, teaching behavior ". . . cannot be studied in the classroom because behavior perishes as it happens and nothing is left to analyze except the memory or a check sheet."<sup>4</sup> Utilization of video and audio tapes of behavior can capture the reality of classroom and community and permit its analysis in a manner that will help teachers become skillful interpreters of teaching and learning.

6. *Continued acceptance of the single model, omniscient teacher.* Nearly all teachers are still prepared to work as isolated adults with standard size groups of children. Instead, we should be preparing them to assume different roles as members of instructional teams. Such roles might include aides, assistants, interns, beginning teachers, ancillary specialist personnel, coordinating teachers, and more. While colleges producing professional teachers may not engage in training all such personnel, they should clearly participate in the design of appropriate instructional staffing patterns and ensure that the preparation of those they do train provides for their effective integration in an instructional team.

7. *Low selection and retention standards for teacher candidates.* Operating in an economy of scarcity, teacher preparation programs frequently admitted, retained, and recommended for teaching licenses, persons woefully weak in handling ideas, oral and written communication, sensitivity to others, and management of their own personal lives. With many subject fields now producing more teachers than there are job openings, there is urgent need for the development of more

<sup>4</sup> *Teachers for the Real World*, op. cit., p. 52.

effective means of predicting teaching success and of screening out those with a low probability of effective performance.

8. *Schedule rigidities and cumbersome procedures for curriculum change.* Many opportunities for relating on-campus and field experiences are blocked because college scheduling practices cut days into fifty-minute fragments. Block scheduling of general education and professional sequences, provision for dividing academic terms into on-campus and field experience segments, utilization of intersession or between semester periods, and other alternatives must be explored. Sensible ideas cannot continue to be impeded because of mechanical rigidities.

The system of curriculum change in most colleges is extremely cumbersome, clearly one which was designed originally to "keep the lid on" and maintain tight controls over programs. With the rapidity of contemporary societal changes, however, it seems essential that curricular change be facilitated rather than retarded. College faculties seldom utilize the "broken front" approach to curriculum improvement which their curriculum specialists urge upon lower school faculties. To speed change and to facilitate experimentation rather than wholesale installation of programs, procedures must permit small groups of school system and college staff to design and implement promising programs with adequate provision for evaluation and for communication of experience.

9. *Absence of student opportunities for exploration and inquiry.* Most teacher educators talk about the need for teachers to be experimental and exploratory in their work. Training programs, however, are often narrowly prescriptive and didactic in form. If we take our own words seriously, we must develop beginning competence in some of the research and inquiry skills among undergraduates preparing to teach.

Prospective teachers must be placed in situations that will afford them opportunities to act like researchers. To those who fear this is beyond them, there is considerable evidence to suggest that we have long been expecting too little of our students and that

these low expectations may have conditioned the performance levels of many.

10. *Schizophrenic role expectations for teacher education departments.* Professors of pedagogy are frequently pressured by their university colleagues to accept a conventional academic view of their role, emphasizing basic scholarship while keeping school and community service commitments to a minimum. At the same time they are beleaguered by school systems wanting them to become involved more directly in the problems of inner city and suburbia, of gifted and disadvantaged, of individualization in a mass culture.

Mounting financial pressures on higher education and the growing problems of schools could bring about a redirection of teacher education that would probably take the form of school systems undertaking the professional training of teachers while the colleges would focus entirely upon academic studies. While doubtless appealing to some, such a development would destroy some of the advantages of the present plan. It would tend to base the preparation of new teachers on the patterns of the present—patterns which have already been shown to be seriously inadequate to the challenges of the times. It would lend support to the concept of teaching as a modestly demanding craft learned relatively easily through an apprenticeship rather than a complex profession demanding high levels of analysis, diagnosis, and planning ability. Separation of knowledge from application and thinking from doing would seem to be a third serious limitation of such a division of labor.

Schools of education should represent a bridge between formal academic studies in the university and the application of this knowledge to school and community problems. While these schools often fail in this role, it would still seem wise to attempt their reform rather than precipitate their abandonment. Universities need to become more directly concerned with the problems of the community, and schools need teachers capable of interpreting experience within frameworks of theory and principle.

The plea for resisting the full scale transfer of teacher education to the schools does not deny the critical need for new and more effective cooperative arrangements between schools and colleges. As James Stone concluded in *Breakthrough in Teacher Education*,

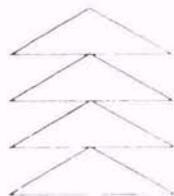
We are shadow-boxing with the real problem unless we are willing to develop new structures for bringing together the groups necessary for the education of our teachers—the schools, the colleges, and the communities in which schools are located.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> James Stone, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

The challenge of American teacher education today is that of building into its structure the capacity for adaptability to the rapidly changing needs of our schools and communities. Rather than a monolithic resisting force irrelevant to current problems and ultimately a stimulus for irrational, violent change, teacher education must find ways of anticipating and facilitating orderly change for the years ahead. In reforming itself it can help to reform all of education.

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