

ON BEING A TEACHER EDUCATOR: A CHANGING CONCEPTION?



SUZANNE M. KINZER*

THE current scene in teacher education is not unlike that of the total educational system—indeed, it is not unlike the conditions of our time. We seem, as individuals and as groups, to be characterized by uncertainty, confusion, lack of direction, and fragmentation. In particular, as teacher educators, we are currently bombarded by somebody or other telling us what we “ought” to be: performance-based, humanistic, accountable, loving, and intellectually rigorous; responsive to students, public schools, young children, and parents; and above all willing to change and experiment with new ideas. One speaker recently summarized the present state of affairs in education with these words: “We are lost, but we’re making good time!”

This statement has meaning for all of us as we reflect upon the many suggested solutions to our educational ills. It is not uncommon for one to attempt to deal with such complex questions as performance certification, competency development, continuing education, various kinds of organizational and process approaches in program revision, and humanizing education—all in one day. Frustration is often coupled with a sense of excitement; and herein lies the challenge of the times. How does one begin to deal with such complex issues without feeling lost?

In terms of teacher education, among many alternatives and proposed “answers,” we are faced with several basic questions:

1. Do we prepare teachers to fit into the public schools as they now exist? Do we attempt to define an ideal system and prepare young teachers as change agents? Or is it some combination of both?
2. What might this ideal school's approach to education look like?
3. Upon what kinds of assumptions is it based? What do we really believe about learners and learning and knowledge?
4. Can any broad areas of competency be identified for effective functioning within that system?
5. What are some kinds of experiences or learning activities that becoming teachers should have that might facilitate their development?
6. Are there some ways to measure the beginning teacher's level of sophistication in terms of these competencies?
7. How about continuing education for young teachers and in-service education for those already part of the system?

* Suzanne M. Kinzer, Assistant Professor, Department of Elementary Education, University of Florida, Gainesville

In order to begin to explore possible answers to these questions, it is necessary to be aware of the conditions of the time. Obviously much observation supports the idea that change is an inevitable force. Many writers have commented upon the implications of change: knowledge explosion and obsolescence; transience in terms of people, places, and things; uncertainty of beliefs; feelings of powerlessness; lack of confidence and stability; identity problems. These are some of the most often discussed consequences of a change-oriented society.

Assuming that these consequences exist, one then asks the most basic question: Does our educational system adequately prepare individuals to deal effectively and creatively with the times? Some say the answer to that question is no. What then are the implications for teacher educators? The choice at first glance seems clear. We can no longer afford to perpetuate a system that is obsolete. Thus we must attempt to define the ideal educational approach, prepare teachers in an appropriate or compatible manner, and send them out to change or revolutionize the existing system.

The difficulty is, however, that in order to change a system, one must be able to survive in it. This implies having some understanding of the needs, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions of those involved in the system as it exists. That is the dilemma—the challenge and the frustration of teacher education.

Exploring further, one then might ask: how is it possible to prepare teachers who can "be all things"; who can understand, survive in, and change an obsolete system; and who can, most importantly, grow and become all they are capable of being? The question is indeed complex, thus the seemingly endless barrage of solutions.

In our search for alternatives we are making good time; but perhaps we are also lost, because we do not often deal with questions as basic as education's function in current and future society. Our solutions often skirt the issues and ignore the real

dilemmas that we, as teacher educators, are facing, and that our students will face as they assume the roles of teacher in the classroom and person in society.

Where, then, do we go from here? Can we continue to presume to be able to teach people how to teach? Or is there no bag of tricks big enough for that? One avenue may be to explore ways in which teacher preparation programs can provide opportunities for experiences that will enable the becoming teacher to develop skill in dealing with himself and the inevitable barrage of inputs and information received in any given lifetime. We talk a lot about this, but do we really do it? It involves taking a good hard look at the process of learning and identifying what is meant by "learning how to learn." It means examining and clarifying our beliefs about learning, learners, and knowledge. It means, in short, changing conceptions about our professional identity. Thus if we believe that learning is processing or being able to deal with information in the broadest sense of the word, then an open-ended, dynamic system may be more appropriate than a tightly scheduled, compartmentalized one.

Teachers and students actively engaged in a continual search for tentative solutions to existing problems, or involved in the exciting process of inquiry about things that interest them, would be the rule rather than the exception. Our professional and personal identity, in this view, would be characterized by what Louise Berman and others term "process-orientation." We need people who can think, feel, and act in ways that are appropriate for them. Such individuals may be the only ones able to deal effectively and creatively with the problems and pleasures of this time or any time.

What new patterns of behavior can we develop for ourselves and our students? That is "where we are at" in teacher education. From one person's point of view, the exploration of these new patterns of behavior should provide the direction for our changing identity. And the excitement and the value may be in the search—not the answers. □

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