

Some Straight – Talk About Teacher Preparation

William G. Monahan

“. . . no more than 200 academic institutions in this country are truly capable of maintaining a competent Teacher Education curriculum and in any of those, additional time and flexibility in programming are essential.”

It is no startling conclusion that just about anybody who wants to can teach school. At least such a notion is not surprising if anyone looks even superficially at the present pattern of teacher preparation.

We talk about it as a really tough job, this business of teaching school. We make superb noises about it as a “profession”; we commit enormous resources and human energy to it in the aggregate, and we come together in national, regional, and state coteries to “tsk-tsk” the plain fact that reform is essential. Yet every proverbial bush hides a vested interest intent on getting its bill-of-goods into the curriculum of teacher education and is concerned about reform only to the extent that it gets a piece of the action.

The “plain fact” of course is that teaching school is not taken very seriously by very many people. Not by many practicing school teachers who are either unable to cope with its demands because they are ill-prepared, or because, with all the best and most ideal preparation currently possible, a lot of them will *never* be able to cope with it because they’re just inadequate teaching personalities. Not by about three-fourths of the more than 1,500 institutions of higher education currently preparing teachers, because they are just

trying to survive. And not by many major universities, because it’s just one of a dozen programs to worry about. Again, in truth, it just seems terribly obvious that something must be done to change all that, and it must be done rather soon. Let me suggest what we might do, and not because I think I know more about it than most, but because I think many already know—the mandate is to somehow make what many of us know needs to happen, happen!

The Nature of the Issue

The issue is not whether teacher education requires reform—it is how, and by whom, and most importantly, *when!* If one looks even superficially at just a few of the obvious conditions and implications of contemporary classroom teaching, the singular consequence is that there is just no way that schools *under present conditions* can be marshalled to cope with the contemporary difficulties involved with the still defensible mission of preparing youth to assume adult roles in the society. General cultural conditions characterize school systems as disorganized social environments; and such massive social interventions as “busing” and vocational-technical experiments affect academic

performance and contribute to an already chaotic scholastic structure. Yet even as these events and the significant changes in families place added burdens on teachers and schools, our preparation sequences in the academy are little changed either in scope or pattern.

There's nothing particularly wrong with the "existing curriculum" in Teacher Education except that it's awful! Yet, we still persist in living with the constraints of a four-year baccalaureate pattern in which only about 25-30 semester hours are in Education, and an "add-on" Masters degree that too frequently is just a little more of the same.

Consider as well that even recognizing the constraints of time and tradition, there are more than 1,500 institutions in the teacher preparation business today and 2,000 or more community colleges who, wise and glorious, are convinced they also should have a piece of that dwindling market. It is my private opinion that no community college should be authorized to prepare teachers to any extent other than that they also prepare lawyers or medical doctors. Such concerns are or should be beyond their scope and competence; that community colleges apparently feel qualified to provide work for teachers is simply another manifestation of the perception that teacher education is not very sophisticated work. In addition, many of the four-year private and public colleges and a good many of the former "teachers colleges" (now known as state universities) ought to get out of the teacher preparation business.

Elitism Is Distorted

What I've observed will be interpreted by some as elitism. If that term suggests a concern for applying the best available human and fiscal resources, the best available faculty, and the opportunity to expose young minds to others who are, in Whitehead's words, ". . . plastic with the world before them . . ." then I plead guilty.

The case for the drastic reduction of teacher preparation programs is a basic issue, and it is simply undeniable.

Quality and Productivity

Preliminary data from a study currently underway at Indiana University, funded by a Na-

tional Institute of Education grant, clearly suggest some dimensions of the "quality" argument. Given only the present pattern of baccalaureate preparation in teacher education, 733 of the more than 1,300 teacher preparation institutions being studied by Professors David Clark and Egon Guba, yield *not* a single "score" on a taxonomy of productive academic criteria developed by these researchers.¹

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Given that one might always argue with criteria of productivity that any research effort posits as measures, findings would likely be the same for any similarly serious and objective analysis.

Toward a New Curriculum

A different program of teacher preparation is now manifest and quite obviously it can't be accomplished by at least 70 percent of the present institutions that try to do it and do it abysmally. It demands that teachers-in-training have at least two or three years beyond the junior year in college. Such a program might culminate in a "Teaching Doctorate" not so much different from what law schools have effected with the J.D., or schools of pharmacy are moving forward with the Pharm.D. But such titles are important only cosmetically and academically. The operational definition of the experiences and activities that comprise them is the essential focus of interest.

The Teaching Doctorate should not be a revision of the more familiar Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) programs. Such programs were dominated by the notion (likely sensible at the

¹ Only preliminary data are available from the study still in progress. Interested persons may want, however, to contact Clark and Guba at the College of Education, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, regarding their findings.

time) that *content* rather than *process* was more needed. On the contrary, now process is the essence of pedagogy. And that process must be oriented to substantive preparation in the reality of the teaching environment.

All of this demands, first of all, a reassessment of the *substance* of teaching. It demands as well, a strong commitment to helping teachers to somehow learn that only they are individually responsible for their own continuing education needs after initial licensure. Finally, there must be opportunity and time to develop effective teaching techniques; to try to know what teaching is; and to help young people to know how to cope with a variety of changing demands and changing values.

Why Extend the Preparation Period?

Surely anyone even remotely familiar with the sorry state of schooling in America today will know that reforming teacher education is only part of an agenda in revising a general pattern of deterioration. Undeniably, it is our sociocultural fabric which schooling rather accurately reflects which requires major reform. Yet schools *are* the major youth-serving agency and teacher education reform is a vital piece of that large agenda. If the sociocultural environment is chaotic, then teachers must be much better prepared to cope with the implications of that. They are not. But they can be.

Expecting that teachers-in-training spend six full years in readiness may seem a not very imaginative proposal. It does not attract much of the glitter of romantically novel or revolutionary ideas. But we've tried a lot of the thoughtfully

provocative things—from "alternative schools" to Zen-existentialism and sensitivity training, and things seem little better. All it really suggests is that *some* schools of education might finally have the clear chance to determine whether much of what they have been saying for a good long while is, or isn't, valid. Once-and-by-God-for-all, they can put-up or shut-up!

It is my private view that there are no more than 200 academic institutions in this country truly capable of maintaining a competent Teacher Education curriculum and in any of those, additional time and flexibility in programming are essential. Moreover, that number of institutions can easily meet the teaching manpower demands of the next thirty years. Institutions with established records of competence, strong traditions of knowledge-production, and accessibility to comprehensive resources are those most capable of meeting the challenge of a six-year curriculum.

In any case, so far we've only offered a kind of mediocre average or worse. I just don't think we can tolerate much more of that. Either we educate young people for teaching careers from the best we can bring to bear, or we quit pretending that it is really very important to do otherwise. ⁷



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