On Teaching as a Profession: A Conversation with Linda Darling-Hammond

Foremost policy watcher at the Center for the Study of Teaching, Linda Darling-Hammond analyzes the impact of state and district policies on teachers in classrooms, comes out squarely in favor of full partnership for teachers in decision making, and points out the critical necessity of the knowledge base for the professionalization of teaching.

Why does the RAND Corporation have a center for studying teaching?

About six or eight years ago, Art Wise and I started looking at how policies affect teachers in classrooms. It soon became clear to us that there was a choice to be made in terms of school improvement strategies between improving the capacity of teachers to do what they felt was most effective with kids, on one hand, and prescribing ever more specific and detailed prescriptions for practice, on the other. At the same time, we became aware that a shortage of teachers was building.

RAND decided that our analysis was correct, that if we wanted to improve American schools, we had to pay a lot more attention to teachers—what types of people were attracted into teaching, what they knew when they got there, and what they were able to do in classrooms. So the corporation decided to establish a Center for the
Study of the Teaching Profession, to support a long line of work about how to improve teaching.

What sorts of things do you study?

We've continued to study teaching in classrooms and what constructs and constrains that activity, including district-level policies like teacher evaluation and teacher selection, as well as instructional policies that define how teaching will take place in schools and classrooms. We've done studies of teacher supply and demand. We also look at state-level policies that determine who becomes teachers: certification, compensation, testing policies. So we've been looking at all levels of the policy system from the bottom up and the top down to better understand teaching.

How did you get to be a policy watcher?

I don't know! I started out in education as a teacher. I still consider myself a teacher. I've taught at every level, and I love teaching. At some point, however, I felt I could not be professionally accountable for my students in the way I wanted to be, given the constraints I operated under. And that propelled me to graduate school. And I became involved in research, and taught at Temple University, and went to the National Urban Coalition to try to figure out how to bring equity into schools, because I always taught in urban settings, and the results of inequity were obvious.

Then I began to realize that once you got the finances straight, and if you could manage to desegregate schools, there were still questions about how to improve what goes on in classrooms. So my work has come around to focus on teaching again. I've come back to my roots.

How would you summarize the status of teachers in America today?

I think America is ambivalent about teachers. There is some evidence that the public is willing to support teachers in terms of greater compensation, and there are efforts to improve conditions for teaching. There is dialogue about improving teachers' status, responsibility, and autonomy. But, at the same time, teachers continue to be treated as second-class citizens—in education the greatest status accrues to those who work least closely with children. Teachers work directly with children, yet they are still not perceived as the most knowledgeable and important members of the education community.

What are the major factors affecting changes in the profession?

Though I don't want to paint education as a purely economic activity, the changing economic status of America has a profound effect on education and on teaching. As a country we cannot expect to maintain or regain, economic and political status in the world while allowing our human capital to fall out however it may. We're in a situation where we simply cannot allow children to fail.

This reality requires teachers who are highly trained and sensitive to what the child brings to the learning experience and what he or she needs, rather than someone who can simply stand up and give a lecture in hopes that the kids will understand it but who has no tools for dealing with a child who doesn't.

So the work of teachers requires more than a prescription of methods?

Certainly. The need to ensure that students don't fail pushes us toward a conception of teaching that requires a lot of pedagogical knowledge—a lot of knowledge about children—a conception that is oriented toward the needs of the client, that in fact is a professional conception.

How will we know when teaching has finally attained the status of a profession?

On the day when parents can expect any teacher to whom their child is assigned to know whatever the profession has decided is most important, then we'll know. We'll have professional accountability in education when every client can expect that every professional will know certain things in order to have been allowed to practice.

So you would say that the crucial hallmark of a profession is its application of knowledge in the service of its clients.

Exactly. As the role of knowledge in responsible service has been recognized, there's been an inexorable march toward professionalization, not only in teaching but in a number of occupations. These are fields where we've accumulated knowledge, and we expect those who practice in those areas to use that knowledge. And that is what has impelled so many fields toward a professional structure.
Yet a great many critics of teaching have called for less in the way of pedagogy and more in the way of content. How will these two kinds of knowledge balance out in teacher preparation programs?

In some states there has been increased emphasis on pedagogical preparation, in others, decreased emphasis. Some critics have advanced the bizarre argument that teacher preparation institutions are not very good and therefore we will get better teachers by avoiding these institutions. This argument ignores the question of whether there are things these talented college graduates ought to know about teaching. It also ignores the choice of improving teacher education institutions as a deliberate strategy. Instead, it substitutes the Bright Person myth of teaching. This myth is that simply by being smart in an area, having gotten a degree in it, one has the tools to convey that knowledge to other people so that it becomes their own. Now, if teaching were only a matter of giving an elegant, well-crafted lecture, we could sit the kids down in front of big videoscreens where performers or other bright people deliver elegant, well-crafted lectures, have them do that six hours a day, and send them home with assignments.

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Good point.

But that’s not all there is to teaching. The situation in teaching is analogous to what was happening in medicine at the end of the 19th century, when the occupation was trying to band together to change the caliber of medical training, and legislators continued to allow irregular practitioners to practice. Their contention was, well, you don’t learn much in these terrible medical schools anyway, so go follow somebody around on a buggy, and you can be a doctor. These assertions were made at Harvard and other universities: you don’t learn to practice medicine, you’re either born with a healing talent, or you’re not.

Teachers are born, not made.

That’s right. And if the born-to-be-a-doctor philosophy had won out, the quality of medical care, health, and life expectancy in this country would be much lower than it is today. So the fact that some teacher education institutions have been disappointing to the people who’ve gone through them, as well as to the policymakers who oversee them, is not an argument for doing away with teacher preparation. We have a substantial amount of knowledge that teachers need to know in order to teach effectively. We know a lot about how children learn. We know a lot about how children can be both helped and harmed. And if we don’t transmit that knowledge, we are being irresponsible.

Educators are experimenting with various methods of acquiring that knowledge: five-year programs, alternative certification, and the like. In theory, at least, it would seem preferable to emphasize what a person knows in giving that person access to credentials, rather than how many credits a person has in this course and how many credits in that.

Most other professions don’t license on the basis of courses taken. They license on the basis of the bar examination or the architectural registration exam or whatever. Of course, those tests often determine what courses people will take. You would be foolish to take the bar if you had not had good courses in torts, contracts, constitutional law—

There aren’t very many Abe Lincolns studying in front of the fireplace any more to become lawyers—

Right. In most states you have to be a graduate of an accredited institution, professionally accredited, in order to sit for the bar. But no state agency dictates to the law school the courses it must offer in order to be approved or certifies graduates based on the courses they have taken. So law schools can figure out the best way to convey their body of knowledge. This freedom allows the field to grow in terms of the knowledge base and how it is transmitted.

However, teacher education institutions have a lot of constraints on how they can configure their programs. And part of the reason is that we still have questions about how to regulate this quasi-profession. It’s being regulated now by state agencies rather than by professional bodies. As licensure tests are increasingly used, the requirements for particular courses for program approval and certification should be eliminated. That’s a reasonable trade-off to expect.

Other professions have a different structure; for example, state standards boards composed of members of the profession that determine how the profession will be regulated. The state legislature delegates authority to this body. But right now everybody seems to be trying to regulate teaching.

The Carnegie Foundation, the Holmes Group, and others are in the process of developing national standards. What’s your prediction as to whether these efforts will succeed?

It’s too soon to know exactly how the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is going to influence the field. It will perform a great service in articulating for the profession what teachers ought to know and be able to do. It is the first established
professional structure outside the subject area organizations that will have some authority to anoint members of the profession in some way. That's very important. You have to have a professional structure before you can have anything else in terms of self-governance in a profession.

The Holmes Group is also an important historical event. I don't know if there's ever been a time when the education deans in this country have come together to try to think with one head about what teacher preparation ought to be. It's too soon to see exactly what the outcomes will be—but that's an important activity that is bound to have some effect on how teachers get prepared. And the fact that it is an effort toward unity among teacher educators is again a statement of professionalism—because the profession is the collective.

What about the influence of the unions? Historically and currently, what part have they played in the effort to professionalize teaching?

At this moment, the unions are part of the vanguard for professionalization. Mitchell and Kirschner, who have studied labor unions for a long time, have hypothesized a theory of maturation of collective bargaining. It goes through stages: first, just getting the right to bargain, then bargaining on bread-and-butter issues, and ultimately negotiating policies. Well, I think there's a fourth stage beyond those, which is negotiating responsibility.

Now we are beginning to see in contracts, particularly where unions have been strongest in the past, a move toward negotiated responsibility. In places like Dade County and Rochester and Salt Lake, the contract doesn't specify how something shall be done; the contract says everyone agrees to a process by which teachers and administrators and members of the community will make certain decisions in certain ways. So they're negotiating who makes decisions about what and by what process, but they're not saying what the decisions themselves will be. And that's been the basis for creating shared governance structures and new professional obligations in the last couple of years.

It would be hard for people who have been adversaries all these years to start seeing it that way.

That's right. The stage of collective bargaining that we still see in most places is adversarial, it's viewed as a win-lose situation, and it's very rule-oriented. And in places where that approach is clung to, we'll find it very hard to professionalize.

This adversarial stage seems to be a function of the fight over the territory of decision making, not an assessment of direction or movement, just arm wrestling.

Oh, yes, we certainly have turf battles going on. But we do see places like Dade County and Rochester where a win-win philosophy has been adopted by the board and the union. Columbus, Cincinnati, Toledo—it's happening in a lot of the middle-sized cities that were the most destitute 10 years ago. These were the places that had teacher strikes, financial crises, desegregation crises, you name it. And out of the ashes in those places the phoenix is rising. It'll be interesting to see whether others follow suit.

Female-dominated occupations have had a hard time achieving the status of professions. How have efforts to professionalize been affected by the preponderance of women in teaching?

Any occupation that has been female-dominated has had a hard time professionalizing. Nursing is a very close analog. There are aspects of role, allocations of authority, and salary considerations that go along with gender. In the last 15 years, however, we've seen a change in women's career opportunities. And this change means teaching must compete with other careers, not only in terms of compensation but also in terms of the authority and responsibility and status associated with the occupation. Michael Sedlak and Steve Schlossman (1986) conducted a historical analysis of teaching; they concluded that the women's movement is probably the most important change of any in the 20th century to affect the structure of teaching. They think it will be the major impetus for the professionalization of teaching.
Are there assumptions, expectations, customs among teachers themselves as a group that hinder further professionalizing teaching?

Teachers have been socialized into the system as it is now. Those who found it hard to be socialized either have become the local renegades and mavericks or have left teaching. The ranks of ex-teachers are filled with those who found it difficult to adapt to a situation in which they were not expected to use their knowledge on behalf of children. Nevertheless, we have a very well-educated teaching force at this moment, as well educated as it’s ever been. We have a very well-educated teaching force at this moment, as well educated as it has ever been, and perhaps as well educated as it will ever be, depending on how things work out in the next few years.

But we have a closed-door ethic in schools. The notion of collegial consultation and decision making is alien in most schools and will be resisted by some teachers. Of course, other teachers are embracing these ideas and working very hard to find ways to make practices like peer review and collaborative decision making real in schools.

And these activities are central to professions because they ensure that there is not an idiosyncratic piece of knowledge in each practitioner, but a shared body of knowledge.

There is probably some ambivalence in the teaching force about the role of knowledge in practice, about the extent to which research and other forms of collective knowledge have anything to offer “me in my classroom with my students.” Again, that’s because there has not been a form of preparation and socialization that particularly legitimizes and makes useful that kind of knowledge.

If you were in charge of a district, how would you process teachers into the profession, from preservice preparation into teaching?

I would start with a theory that the caliber of the people is the most important thing you have to work with, not the procedures or handbooks or regulations or curriculum guides. I would emphasize selection, recruitment, and evaluation. And I would pay much less attention to creating a new curriculum every year, for example, because I would have to make trade-offs, monetarily. I would reduce the size of the curriculum development office and allocate resources to finding, getting, keeping, and supporting good people.

I would look for teachers who were well prepared, with a strong grounding in child psychology, that is, developmental psychology, cognitive science, learning theory—that is, they had strong pedagogical training as well as good subject matter backgrounds.

Suppose you had secured a pool of well-trained applicants. How would you choose your new teachers from among them?

I would put in place a selection process in which teachers in the local school were actively involved—faculty, including the principal, of course—in selecting their colleagues, after the East Williston model in New York (see Wise et al., 1987). This kind of process forces people to talk about good teaching—it’s one of the ways in which people talk about what their shared knowledge base is and their shared values are—and once you’ve selected somebody, you’re much more inclined to support that person as a member of the faculty.

You would involve the principal in this process?

Yes, because the principal is also a colleague, but ultimately because you wouldn’t want a principal to be able to escape responsibility for any of his or her staff by saying, “I didn’t pick this person; you sent him to me.” If the principal helps make the decision, you begin to get accountability in the school system. Of course, some centralization of the selection process is necessary to make sure that people get equitably selected and placed, but accountability begins at the school site.

How would you introduce these peer-selected teachers to their work?

I would place beginning teachers in a professional development school. This school would be overstaffed—it would have more than the usual ratio of faculty to students. The teachers would be master teachers, that is, experts, who were interested in and capable of inducting new entrants as well as teaching kids very well. Beginning teachers would be assigned to work in teams with master teachers.
to learn how to put theory into practice, how to become good clinical teachers.

In a large urban district, I would create such a school in the central city, and I'd see to it that the kids got a state-of-the-art education, because the school would have to be an exemplar of good practice. I would also use that kind of setting—not necessarily just one, perhaps more than one—as a way to provide sabbaticals to veteran teachers. They could take a year's assignment, or a semester's, in the professional development school to rejuvenate, to experience the exhilaration of seeing what's new under the sun and of working with the young teachers coming through. A school like that would encourage professional growth across the district.

Of course, day-to-day support for teachers would be part of your plan, too?

In my schools I would expect shared governance; governance shared between faculty, administrators, and parents like the Salt Lake City model (see Wise et al. 1984). The school decision-making councils worked so effectively that the stakeholders in the process not only felt the education process was effective, but all indicators showed that in fact it was.

Faculties would meet at least two hours a week in their departments or in grade-level teams to talk to each other about how they were doing their work, why they were doing it in this way, and how well it was working. They would determine what kinds of staff development they wanted to purchase or acquire for themselves as a faculty.

And I'd emphasize evaluation for beginning teachers prior to tenure to ensure that once they got tenure, we didn't have to check on them once a year for competence. We could then go on and do more useful things on their behalf and on behalf of the kids. And then I would put in place peer review of practice, much more than peer review of practitioners, where peers in fact review the practices in their schools.

The caliber of the people is the most important thing you have to work with, not the procedures or handbooks or regulations or curriculum guides.

It's going to take some time and some work, but these are the practices I see as the most promising for turning teaching into a true profession.

What are the effects of recent state policies on teaching, on teachers, and on the prospects for making teaching a profession?

Some of the reform activity has been encouraging to teachers, particularly in those states where teachers have been taken seriously as partners in the reforms and where the act of teaching has not been treated in a trivial, simplistic manner. But there's a lot of cynicism among teachers who have been reformed many times and are tired of it.

So the reform movement has been a mixed blessing for teachers, and it's been a mixed blessing for kids, as well. The idea that education can be improved by mandating annual testing of kids and 822 curriculum objectives for each grade level and a new management scheme with a little merit pay sprinkled in—it's an impoverished idea. And when you see what's happening now—for example, Georgia and some other places that are testing kindergartners now for promotion—you know that there are policies being enacted that all of our professional knowledge tells us are irresponsible means of educating or treating children.

Now, either our professional voice will become much stronger, or such well-intentioned but misguided ideas are going to hurt children. In the next decade 50 percent or more of the school population will include categories of kids who have traditionally been underserved: minority and low-income children and recent immigrants. If we persist in policies that track them, that convey to them from kindergarten on that they cannot succeed, that deliver dumbed-down textbooks to them and lists of curriculum objectives totally divorced from either real life or meaningful schoolwork—those policies are going to destroy a cohort of kids in our schools. And we'll see unbelievable dropout rates and failure rates . . . prescribed by policy.

The outcome depends on whether our professional voice becomes sufficiently strong to convey what we know about the proper education of children to the people who create the policies. It is the policies that will determine what schools and classrooms look like in the 21st century.

References


Linda Darling-Hammond is Director, Education and Human Resources Program, The RAND Corporation, 2100 M St., N.W., Washington, DC 20037. 1270. Anne Meek is Managing Editor, Educational Leadership.