Patterns for Reform in American Teacher Education

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Public accountability in America has led to the reform of teacher preparation. A competency-based field-centered approach is emerging. The two major processes for achieving reform are the development of alternative teacher education institutions and the conversion of existing ones. The political and educational aspects of each process are considered.

La réforme de la formation des maîtres aux Etats-Unis a été amenée par le développement de l’idée de responsabilité publique. On remarque l’élaboration d’une approche fondée sur la compétence pratique. Les deux principaux facteurs de cette réforme sont le développement d’un nouveau genre d’établissements pour la formation des maîtres et la transformation de ceux qui existent actuellement. Cet article fait l’exposé des aspects politique et éducationnel de chacun de ces facteurs.

The need for reform at every level of the American educational system, including that of teacher preparation, has been the subject of wide debate. This need has also fostered a public call for accountability. It is not my purpose in this paper to repeat the case for this reform, but rather to look at the key questions concerning it: What are its directions? What are the processes through which it is to be achieved? The thesis of this paper is that the current mood for public accountability in education has helped trigger a reform movement in teacher education that will necessitate a conversion of existing preparatory institutions. This conversion will foster both more alternatives within existing teacher education institutions as well as new alternative institutions. Achieving this reform will inevitably take us into the yet underdeveloped realm of the politics of education.

Public Accountability in Education

President Nixon began his Education Message of 1970 with the statement, “American education is in urgent need of reform.” This conclusion is being slowly translated into national, state, and local policies. The real effect will be mandated change from the halls of executive, legislative, and judicial chambers. We have a growing crisis of confidence in our educational institutions. Significant portions of those who use public educational institutions have finally realized that these institutions do not work for them at a time when the quality of education is essential for surviving in an advanced technological society. This critical mass of discontented educational consumers, after years of attempting to effect change directly, i.e., by dealing with the institutions themselves, have turned their pressure toward their elected officials. Other social forces have also converged on our public officials, such as the oversupply of teachers, the failure of compensatory programs, the lack of increase in educational productivity following increases in public expenditures. These forces have also underscored the need for basic reform. In brief, the public is unwilling to support (with additional monies) outmoded educational institutions. This is especially the case in our present period of fiscal austerity. At least one governor has proposed an Inspector General to oversee the improvement of fiscal expenditures in public education.

A component of the educational system that has recently been affected by this broad reform policy is teacher education. As the public schools face increased
public criticism, it is inevitable that sooner or later some of the roots of the problems would be traced to the preparation of teachers.

However, the single biggest problem that has reinforced the mood of accountability in teacher preparation is the rather dramatic shift in supply and demand of teachers. We seem to have moved abruptly from a marketplace in which there was a shortage of teachers to one in which there is an oversupply. This situation, in turn, affects turnover rates among teachers, i.e., teachers tend to hang on to their jobs. The oversupply problem has led to further analyses of zero-growth projections, which are in sharp contrast to the baby boom of post-World War II.

Nothing affects institutional change as much as changes in the marketplace. Reports from the National Education Association, Department of Labor, U.S. Office of Education, and American Association of State Colleges and Universities all indicate a surplus. Newspaper accounts of this surplus often strike closer to the taxpayer, as this example in Pennsylvania:

"Pennsylvania's colleges and universities will turn out 20,000 new teachers this year, but only half of them are needed. . . .
For Pennsylvania taxpayers, it means they subsidized the education of far more teachers than they had to. The taxpayers' cost of training a teacher in one of the 14 state colleges is $4,300." (Philadelphia Inquirer, 1972)

There are several implications growing out of the shifts in supply and demand and the public pressure for increased professional productivity. For one thing, it appears that there will have to be some significant reduction in the numbers of students in teacher education. During the teacher shortage phase of past decades, there was an expansion of undergraduate teacher education. The emphasis was on quantity—we were even busy tapping new sources for teaching, such as liberal arts graduates. The demand for teachers was so great that many institutions, especially state colleges, developed a type of mass production model.

This mass production, factory model is now about to be dismantled by supply and demand. There is the hope that the oversupply of teachers is actually a value in disguise, for it permits a return to quality control. Dealing with fewer candidates allows for greater personal attention and more selectivity in the basic functions of recruiting and selection.

At the same time, the productivity concerns call for a vast expansion of the in-service functions of teacher preparation. The experienced, certified teachers in the schools are being subjected to increased administrative and public pressures. They need a type of retooling that can help them increase their educational productivity skills. However, the present model of in-service education is suspect. Most teachers have to travel to a nearby college or university to take courses. The accumulation of education courses is supposed to improve professional competence, i.e., the more credits the better teacher, and thus a person with a Master's degree in education should be more productive in the classroom than should a person with a Bachelor's degree. However, the logic of this pattern is increasingly being questioned.

Further, there is a growing suspicion that the courses taken have little to do with the needs of the teacher in a particular setting, i.e., they are of limited value to the real problems he faces on the job.

Trying to connect in-service programs to the actual productivity problems of teachers has led to in-service programs being mounted by the public school districts themselves. Practical courses in the teaching of reading, use of media, handling of discipline problems, etc., are offered after school for in-service credit. The matter of credit deserves some comment.

The entire process of in-service education as it appears today in most colleges is a result of state requirements for teacher certification. Most states require teachers to add a specified number of college course credits to maintain their teaching certificate, i.e., the initial state certificate is called provisional and can be made permanent only by taking a specific number of college credits. The state recognizes only college credit for advanced teacher certification and, consequently, experienced teachers are required to attend the in-service program at the college. Credits are tied to certification and to school salary schedules.

As for the local school district in-service program, teachers can attend for credit that is usually recognized for salary increment purposes.

There are a host of school problems—from specific areas such as reading, learning disabilities, individualization, to broader ones such as urban, rural, bilingual, or environmental education. School officials want both inexperienced and experienced teachers to be competent in these fields. In-service education therefore has to be altered. The programs need to be more responsive to