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A RENAISSANCE IN TEACHER EDUCATION?

“One Uponce a Time”

When my daughter was three or four years old, she liked to cuddle up on the living room sofa with her mother and request still another story that would begin with “One uponce a time.” Once upon a time was not in the Dark Ages or the days of Robin Hood but in the earlier years of her parents. For my purposes here, I go back to the year 1938-1939 when I was attending the Vancouver, British Columbia, Normal School, preparing to teach in an elementary school. The Great Depression had not yet merged into World War II, which in Canada began in September 1939. My expectation was that, at best, I would teach in a one-room school in a remote part of the province with a salary of \$780 – not per month but per year.

Several of our instructors had been school inspectors; a few still were. Most of the courses were announced to be on the teaching of the school subjects but were actually more on those subjects than on their teaching. We gathered up some acorns of teaching as squirrels might gather up acorns for the coming winter. I recall two episodes of teaching: the school principal’s teaching of how to organize the day in a one-room school and a brief foray into progressive education by a

young female instructor. The former proved not to be helpful. The latter episode is such that I include it in my book *Romances with Schools*. It got me thinking about “hands-on” rather than just verbal learning.

The spring of 1939 had come and with it a month of student teaching in each of two schools in North Vancouver where I had grown up and still lived. The first was in a school I had attended for several years and was entirely in a so-called “opportunity class.” The second was in a class of sixth- and seventh-grade pupils in a six-room school as well as in the school as a whole. In the first, I was largely an observer and tutor. In the latter, I was given the opportunity, among other things, to plan and teach a three-week unit in science and to participate in the school’s functioning.

There was almost nothing in these two months of student teaching that linked with the teacher education program at the normal school. A normal school instructor visited me for part of one day at both. Part of each visiting day was devoted to what might be described as sustaining a good relationship with the principals and supervising teachers of the two schools. It was my full range of experiences and conversations with the

principal and teachers at the second school that began for me the cultivation of an educative ecology of mind, which I discussed in Issue One of Volume Two of *The Goodlad Occasional*. The month at the first school taught me that very undesirable learning situations can be powerful and productive. I began to understand there that culture is our most powerful teacher, whether it be home, school, marketplace, or nation.

My experiences in and readings about the development of schooling and teacher education in Canada and the United States have been very similar. The writings of historians such as Lawrence Cremin, William Johnson, Jurgen Herbst, and David Tyack have been particularly helpful. Herbst describes the unheralded degree to which normal schools paralleled at a lower academic level the role of the land-grant institutions of higher education in the provision of basic general education. Large numbers of students enrolled in normal school having no intention of becoming teachers. During the late decades of the nineteenth century, teachers colleges were replacing normal schools in the United States with a clear intent of preparing the nation's teachers. With the absorption of teachers colleges into both Columbia University and the University of Chicago near the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth, a new era of teacher education was begun. By the year 1938-1939, normal schools clearly were on the wane in both countries. By the end of World War II, most were "one uponce a time."

Transition

The coming of teacher preparation into the liberal arts colleges and the universities brought on academic tension

that had not been there before. The relatively lowly occupation of school teaching had been safely contained in the normal schools and teachers colleges. As the nineteenth century passed into the twentieth, programs for preparing teachers were to become organizational units in even the most prestigious educational institutions. This unit was named a department, college, or school of EDUCATION. But education was something in which all units of universities engaged. In essence, then, this new unit named EDUCATION was usurping in context the major function of the entire college or university. For some professors in the arts and sciences, this was an insult. They, too, taught and they, too, could teach future teachers to teach. Further, what was required for teaching was a thorough understanding of one's discipline, not just of how to teach. Consequently, an academic unit without a discipline to teach was commonly regarded as intellectually bankrupt. The issues arising out of this new development and the perceptions pertaining to it launched academic turf wars that often have been intense and have continued to some degree into the twenty-first century.

The emergence of research as the primary function of universities following World War II added still another burden to the conduct and status of teacher education. By then, states were specifying a substantial chunk of the teacher preparation curriculum. This alerted universities to the fact that participation in teacher education lessened control of their own destinies. Some private universities eliminated teacher education, and a few dropped the field of education entirely.

The comprehensive study of teacher education conducted by James B. Conant and his team in the early 1960s revealed enormous similarity among teacher education programs throughout the nation. This was due in large part to the similarity among state regulations and the requirements of accreditation. The immediate post-war drive was for all teachers – both elementary and secondary – to secure bachelor’s degrees. This enormously increased the presence of teacher education in four-year colleges and universities, commonly resulted in a crowded curriculum, and threatened a longstanding institutional commitment to a solid program of general education and academic majors and minors.

What Conant reported in 1963 was what he considered to be excessive intrusion of teacher education requirements into the desired university educational program. He saw intensive clinical student teaching, comprehensive general education, and teaching command of the discipline as desirable for a sound teacher education program. But what he had in mind was for the preparation of secondary school teachers. He admitted to being baffled about the preparation of an elementary school teacher. He saw little use for the so-called “foundations” component of educational history, philosophy, and psychology – domains that had become common to teacher education programs. His colleagues talked him out of eliminating them in his recommendations. They saw the foundations courses as the intellectual core of teacher education.

Conant’s report was not to have the impact of his earlier report on high schools, which was taken seriously by nearly every school board in the nation. The growing expectation for faculty

research was rapidly changing the culture of universities to the degree that even those that had been teachers colleges viewed research as their primary function. Teacher education and a report on it were not priorities in higher education.

I clearly remember a conversation I had with the president of a prestigious university when colleagues and I were conducting our comprehensive Study of the Education of Educators in the second half of the 1980s. I was telling him about several institutions we had visited that had been teachers colleges but now were regional state universities. Most members of their faculties had come on board believing that they would be rewarded for good teaching but were rapidly finding out that the point systems being used for merit reviews awarded higher numbers for research than for teaching. Supervising student teachers was rapidly becoming something to be turned over to teaching assistants and non-tenure line temporary faculty. On my describing this and more to this president, his comment was “My, oh, my, institutions like mine have done teaching in our schools a great disservice, haven’t we?”

Recent Years and Today

During the three decades from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s, a repetitive pattern of teacher education programs hardened into place. They began with three “foundations of education” courses: history, philosophy, and psychology. Increasingly over this period, a kind of introduction into teaching eroded the historical and philosophical. There followed for secondary school teachers a course on the teaching of the subject that was the students’ major. Student teaching

followed, all of this during the junior and senior years of college. The balance of the curriculum for secondary school teachers was general education and the completion of the major and quite often a minor. The courses in the teaching of this major field sometimes were taught in the school of education and sometimes in the academic department. There sometimes have been turf wars regarding responsibility for this teaching.

It was the program for prospective elementary school teachers that caused the most controversy. Since classroom teachers in elementary schools usually teach most of the subjects in the curriculum, it was thought necessary for prospective teachers to have courses in methods of teaching these subjects, courses that commonly address subject content as well. The provision of these courses in a four-year curriculum commonly cut into the general education program that professors in the arts and sciences saw as necessary, as did critics outside of the college or university. In some colleges, the requirement of an academic major disappeared. Where it did not, the result was a very crowded four-year program of more than 130 semester hours or more than 200 quarter hours. The common choice for many prospective elementary school teachers was college attendance during at least one summer session or a heavily loaded curriculum during the regular academic years, if they wished to fulfill requirements for both graduation and a teaching certificate. Most teachers were and still are prepared in the four-year undergraduate curriculum.

This is what colleagues and I studying a representative sample of programs across the United States in the late 1980s found to be firmly established.

Indeed, by the time we had visited a dozen programs, we correctly predicted that this is what we would find in the rest of our sample of twenty-nine institutions. We also found that most provosts and arts and sciences deans were both unhappy with what they thought to be the quality of the institution's programs for prospective elementary school teachers and puzzled about what to do to correct the situation. Ironically and significant, however, some seemed to be formulating their conclusions out of prejudice rather than knowledge.

But the prejudice sometimes went beyond elementary education. I recall my conversation with the provost of a flagship public university. Near the end of his passionate criticism of teacher education at his university, he gave high praise to the undergraduate program in journalism because he said it so nicely balanced general and professional studies. He then described it to me. It met all the graduation requirements of the university in general education and a major in an academic subject, in addition to providing the necessary professional education in journalism. Upon checking, I found that the secondary teacher preparation program was very much the same. The elementary program also met all university requirements but required more courses overall. It was clear that the provost was little informed about teacher education on his own campus.

The most disturbing of our findings was that nowhere did we find close communication and collaboration among the three component parts of the teacher education program: the college of education, the college of arts and sciences, and the schools providing the student teaching experiences. We found one small private university where the arts

and sciences departments and the department of education collaborated in exemplary fashion. But there were no ongoing attempts to bring into this collaboration the teachers, principals, or schools where their student teachers were placed. At a small public institution, we found very close bonds between the schools where student teachers were placed and the college of education but no ties between the education school and the arts and sciences departments. Almost always we found that faculty members who engaged entirely or primarily in the student teaching part of the program were not on the tenure track of assistant to full professor. So much for tripartite collaboration and program renewal.

The late 1980s saw the beginning of what now appears to be a renaissance in teacher education. It began, I think, with the creation and work of the Holmes Group, which brought about a stirring of intent in the major public and private research universities. However, substantial private and public money for the renewal of teacher education did not emerge until the 1990s. The popular theme – and where the money was – had to do with school “reform,” a nasty word conveying the message that our school system was in bad shape, educators were not performing as they should, and outside intervention was necessary if the needed changes were to take place. Teacher education was only belatedly seen as a major ingredient in the necessary reform process. A small handful of philanthropies saw things differently. Colleagues and I were fortunate in gaining financial support from the Exxon and Mertz-Gilmore Foundations to conduct the study in teacher education referred to above. Then, after our study was completed, they and other foundations joined us in

creating and supporting the National Network for Educational Renewal (NNER), which is committed to an agenda of bringing together the arts and sciences, the college of education, and partner schools in the simultaneous renewal necessary to robust teacher education programs.

One of the most significant calls for major changes in teacher education came from the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, which published its landmark report in 1996. The report drew from many sources in putting together a comprehensive agenda for redesigning teacher education. In the present century, prospects for the necessary renewal have been enormously enhanced by the commitment of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, in association with several other foundations, to fund eleven settings in the nation for the purpose of implementing some of the key recommendations that have clearly surfaced during the past few years.

If there is any one thing that is absolutely crucial to forging and sustaining this renaissance, it is what is now commonly referred to as tripartite renewal. As I have sketched above, teacher education has been conducted for decades in three disparate components of the whole that simply must be merged into a unified whole. This must be institutionalized while the passion for change is high. But much more than organizational change is necessary. There must be fundamental cultural change in all three of the components working on a common mission. That mission has to do with a democracy that simply will not take care of us if we do not take care of it. And that care will come about only if we succeed in developing and sustaining a

democratic public. And that public, in turn, will come about only through education. Arguably, the most important component of this education is the education of those who teach the young. Since all of us are responsible for teaching the young, we are not talking only about institutional change. We are also talking about profound cultural change. Our

educational institutions must lead the way, and the time is now.

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