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Reclaiming Space for Democracy in Teacher Education

Preparing Teachers in Current Contexts of Neoliberal Accountability

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Preparing new teachers to teach students to meaningfully participate in and contribute to a democratic society would, arguably, not evoke contentious and persistent debate, *if* the American public education system were based on a common understanding of education as a right for all children, regardless of background, disposition, (dis)ability, and the like—that is, a public education as a public good (Anton, Fisk, & Holmstrom, 2000). However, in an era of neoliberal politics and policies bent on the promises of market-driven, privatized, and deregulated schools (Ball, 2003; Hursh, 2007), consensus on the purpose of education and the role of schools in society seems intangible. The conception of access to education as a public right, as well as the cultivation of the next generation of democratic citizens through education as a public good, is neither commonly shared nor reflected in teacher education programs bent on the same neoliberal types of principles and premises (Sleeter, 2008; Zeichner, 2006).

Although many have examined the impact of neoliberalism on education writ large (Ball, 2003, 2012; Hursh, 2007; Hursh, & Wall, 2011), and more specifically on teacher preparation (Jenlink, 2016, 2017; Sleeter, 2008; Weiner, 2007; Zeichner, 2010), I suggest herein that recent changes in federal policy, albeit still within current contexts of neoliberal accountability, are creating spaces for teacher educators to grapple with the dilemma of preparing teachers for dual, dichotomous roles. That is, teachers must serve as stewards of a public good and engage in the democratic society for which they prepare students, while also arguably complying, at least on some level for now, with accountability and evaluation processes driven by existing neoliberal politics and policies.

Neoliberal Accountability Policy

Based on a neoliberal conception of public education, schools serve a production function in a competitive economy bolstered by the individual efforts of knowledgeable and highly skilled workers (Harvey, 2005; Weiner, 2007).

Accordingly, and in theory, teachers should be prepared to teach content standards and measure student mastery as their primary job responsibilities. Well-prepared teachers, however, are also expected to demonstrate adherence to professional standards that value efficiency and compliance toward quantifiable measures of their own professional effectiveness (Ball, 2003; Hursh, 2007).

Over the past three decades, federal and state policy has reified this conception, at least in part, through standards-based curriculum and high-stakes testing for students (e.g., via the NCLB Act of 2001) and evaluation systems devised and implemented to hold teachers accountable for student achievement (i.e., value-added models and the like) (e.g., via the Race to the Top Act of 2011). Accountability for teacher education programs for their graduates' students' learning based on scores on large-scale standardized tests remains at the forefront of similar policy debates (e.g., via the Higher Education Amendments of 2008 to the Higher Education Act [HEA] of 1965, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation Standards, n.d.). Although recent federal policy changes with the passage of the ESSA, 2016, allow states some flexibility in how teacher quality is measured (i.e., eliminating the requirement that teachers be evaluated based on their students' test scores), the debate surrounding accountability policy for teacher education programs has abated little, due at least in part to the lack of rich, meaningful, public dialogue about the purpose of schools in society and the roles of teachers and teacher education programs in student learning.

Solving the Dilemma of Teacher Education

Neoliberal accountability purports to solve the perceived problems of variation in content standards across states, teacher instructional quality, and levels of student mastery by inoculating schools and their students against teachers who are neither properly socialized to adhere to a market-based understanding of teacher professionalism (Jenlink, 2016) nor seemingly noncompliant toward teacher evaluation systems based, at least in part, on student achievement (Holloway, & Brass, 2017). The neoliberal agenda conceptualizes these as problems to be solved, perhaps first and foremost by identifying and rewarding (or otherwise sanctioning) teacher education programs that are (or are not) competitive in admissions, prescriptive in curriculum and field training, and predictable in output and outcomes.

However, the notion of "solving" the problems of K-12 standards, instruction, and student mastery by "fixing" teachers is based on "a linear story in which problems are discovered, potential solutions are generated, and positive results are achieved through steady effort" (Schneider, 2017, p. 1). In a neoliberal view, well-prepared teachers who adhere to professional standards and comply with evaluation processes will also be efficient and effective in

preparing future workers. In contrast, Schneider (2017) argues that teacher preparation is better understood as a dilemma, one that “rather than being linear in nature . . . is parabolic” and therefore cannot be solved. That “the passage of time leads back to the original point of departure. Solutions are tried and discarded, but as the past is forgotten, they eventually are embraced again” (p. 1, see also Cuban, 2001). Hence, neoliberal policy is predicated on the notion that increasing student achievement, as measured by test scores, by also improving teacher quality and the education programs that prepare teachers, as measured by the same test scores, will solve the problems of K-12 education.

Reclaiming Space for Democracy

Perpetual efforts to improve the processes and products of teacher education through neoliberal politics and policies, however, lack regard for and even oppose democratic accountability, a means of creating space for dialogue about what is quality teaching and how to prepare quality teachers (Jenlink, 2016). Although the flexibility now afforded to states through ESSA (2016) still reflects the neoliberal view of teacher quality as measurable and in need of measurement, these recent policy changes may create spaces to reframe the conversation about teacher education. That is, how to prepare teachers for the important roles they will (and should) play in schools and society. Teacher educators are called, then, to consider how to prepare teachers to serve in dual, dichotomous roles in the classroom as both stewards of a public good and models of engaged citizenship for their students (Sleeter, 2008).

Reclaiming space for democratic accountability, then, also requires deliberate action and effort by teacher educators. First, dialogue about democratic accountability outside of and despite the neoliberal conception of teacher quality is necessary to reassert teacher preparation not as the solution to fix teachers but as the vehicle to manage the dilemma of preparing teachers for dual roles (see, for example, Jenlink, 2017; Schneider, 2017). Second, it is important to recognize that some, if not many, preservice teachers enter preparation programs without already conceptualizing their role as stewards of a public good, especially if they have not had opportunities to engage in the ongoing policy debates that have had (and will continue to have) a profound impact on their preparation and future teaching experiences. Purposively integrating curriculum and field experiences into teacher education programs that engage preservice teachers with the existing research is critical for democratic accountability efforts, at the minimum (Sleeter, 2008). Third, and perhaps more importantly, providing opportunities for preservice teachers to participate in and contribute to the larger policy debates impacting the field better fosters a sense of professional identity. If not socialized otherwise,

their identity here would otherwise likely be diminished by their other roles, defined by acts of adherence and compliance (Jenlink, 2016).

Better preparing teachers, such that they adhere to professional standards and comply with evaluation processes, is not necessarily or entirely for the purposes of protecting the right of all students to a quality education or of fostering citizenship in a democratic society (Sleeter, 2008). Rather, teachers and school leaders must be afforded their professional right to have an opportunity to prepare students to act as citizens who will foster and perpetuate a democratic society. In turn, teacher educators should focus on actively preparing teachers not only to assume but also to redefine the important professional role of stewardship, as well as to model engaged citizenship for their students by affirming and reifying democratic accountability in the profession.

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