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Top 10 Issues Facing Teacher Education

Gregory J. Marchant, Ball State University
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For efficiency of reading and clarity, I have always appreciated articles that contain brief lists which in single statements encapsulate the main points of the article. Coming from Ball State University, the alma mater of David Letterman, I also have a certain predisposition to “top ten” lists. With this in mind, a little more than two years ago I sat down with Gary Griffin while meeting at Educational Testing Services in Princeton, New Jersey. A year later we continued the discussion of issues problematic to the education of teachers. What follows are the ten points we discussed that served as basis for discussion during my presidential address at this years annual meeting. I have added some possible approaches for each issue. I welcome your comments.

Number Ten: Negative public perceptions of the quality of U.S. education

Criticism of the U.S. public schools was documented in a *Nation at Risk* and hit extreme political tones during the Reagan and Bush administrations. Much of the well publicized decline in public education and its inadequacy relative to other countries was refuted in *The Manufactured Crisis* (Berliner & Biddle, 1995), and presented by David Berliner and Gerald Bracey at last year’s MWERA annual meeting. Although this year’s presentation by Herb Walberg echoed the old themes of the generic woes of public education, those findings were again questioned by the audience. Regardless of whether our schools are in academic disrepair or not, the impact of the perception is evident. The status of teaching, teachers, and teacher education has taken a beating. Universities often view schools of education as cash cows with high enrollment, but low scholarly value. Concern has been raised over the quality of college students attracted to the field and the quality of their teaching when they graduate. Funding and policy decisions in education often reflect more of a punitive than a supportive approach.

Possible approach: Teacher education programs should exercise damage control over misinformation about our schools and teaching. Sound educational theory and research should be used to inform those inside and outside of education as to the real problems and likely solutions. Teacher education programs need to be the banner wavers for what is good about teaching and teacher education.

Number Nine: Lack of foundations in education

Education as a field has history and philosophy; a foundation. For those who make the field their career this foundation should be part of their knowledge base. Unfortunately,

far too often everything old is new again without the insight that the old has been tried. Dewey is rediscovered without the knowledge that he was discovered in the first place. Teachers need to be able to reflect on why they use or should not use certain approaches. Foundations in education provide foundations for professional decision making.

Possible approach: Reverse the trend of reducing and eliminating foundations courses. Better still, infuse foundations issues throughout the teacher education curriculum.

Number Eight: Lack of teacher/scholar orientation of college faculty

Few, if any, colleges support a true teacher/scholar model even in a traditional sense, let alone in the Ernest Boyer *Scholarship Reconsidered* sense. Quality teachers are dismissed from universities due to lack of scholarship (research and publication), and conversely research is not expected or rewarded at some colleges emphasizing teaching. Undergraduate education students are often left with few, if any, models of inquiring, reflective, innovative, quality college teachers. Without these models, education students are left to conceptualize action research and reflective practice on their own and often after they leave the teacher education program.

Possible approach: Colleges and universities must reconsider their notion of scholarship and give more than lip service to the types of models they wish to support. College faculty will not and should not involve themselves in activities which will leave them without a future in the profession. Colleges need to recognize and reward the teacher/scholar model.

**Number Seven:
Student prior knowledge and experience**

There are few things that a college student has more of than experience as a student. This is both a blessing and a curse. The knowledge and experience gained as a student can serve as the basis for considerations of teaching and learning. Reflecting on past teaching and learning experiences can be a useful exercise. However, this knowledge and experience may also set expectations and biases. Often education students feel they know how students learn best because they know (or think they know) how they learn. They feel they know how they should teach because they know the kind of teachers they liked. Their subjective interpretations of teaching and learning can undermine efforts to provide contemporary approaches that take into account a variety of aspects of learning.

***Possible solution:** Challenge the education students' conceptualizations of teaching and learning with examples and simulations. When appropriate, college courses should model alternative effective teaching approaches rather than rely on lectures.*

**Number Six:
Failure to experience meaningful diversity**

A college course in multicultural education does not begin to deal with the issues of diversity that teachers face. This is often the extent to which diversity issues are addressed, if at all. Teaching is about dealing with diversity; twenty or more children, all with different backgrounds, creating different constructions of the world. Teachers try to find the right connections and bridges to help children learn. Central to that task is understanding the variety of worlds the children come from and the different forms the connections and bridges might take.

***Possible approach:** Consider diversity as a theme running throughout teacher education: diversity in familial and cultural background of children, diversity in learning and learners, diversity in teaching and teachers.*

**Number Five:
Inadequate and inappropriate field experiences**

Education students have long held field experiences, especially student teaching, in high regard. This respect has often come at the relative discrediting of college course work in education. The field experiences tend to be viewed as the real world, and course work viewed as information to be memorized for a test. One possible suggestion is that courses need to be more practical; however, another implication

might be that education students face too many inconsistencies in field experiences without the support to make connections to course work. Specifically, education students are usually asked to observe in classrooms without knowing what or how to observe. Brief unguided exposure to certain types of classrooms, such as urban and inclusion classes, can do more to reinforce stereotypes than to provide insight. The amount of involvement and responsibility expected in practicum placements can vary greatly, as can teaching approaches (and potentially the quality of teaching) of the cooperating classroom teacher. The amount of responsibility that the college assumes for the training and monitoring of cooperating teachers varies, but in most cases is minimal.

***Possible approach:** The number of field experiences may need to be increased in most teacher education programs. These experiences need to be better structured, strategically planned, and monitored for quality and content.*

**Number Four:
Student maturity**

In few other fields, does the trip from high school student to a fully functioning professional occur in four short years. Education students must mature in terms of ability to comprehend the multitude of complex variables necessary to make professional teaching decisions and must be able to assume a level of responsibility unheard of in other fields. Developmental psychology and personal experience tell me that the typical college undergraduate may not be ready for much of what we are attempting in most teacher preparation programs. The Holmes Group recognized the need for a firm foundation in an undergraduate major prior to teacher education, and Martin Haberman has repeatedly called for alternative teacher certification programs as a means of attracting more mature, experienced people to teaching. Economics suggests that the expectation of significantly longer training prior to employment in teaching may not be a practical solution, and alternative certification programs have demonstrated limitations that make them less than desirable.

***Possible approach:** Teacher education programs must be carefully structured to give undergraduate students knowledge and skills, but especially experience; because these students must not only gain knowledge and skills, they must "grow up" and gain professional experience. Teacher education programs should also adopt a role in the continued professional development of the teachers they produce, especially for the first few years they are in practice.*

Number Three: College turf and tradition

College courses are traditionally viewed as the income generating properties of college departments, the currency being student credit hours generated. Because jobs and power are often at stake, battles and compromises are made with great concern by departments. The political battles to get and keep courses are legendary in some colleges. Illogical arrangements and ownership of courses are frequently explained with history rather than with what is best for the education student.

***Possible approach:** Reevaluate the teacher education program strictly in terms of how the education students might be most efficiently and effectively developed into quality teachers, then look at the real limitations of the college rather than the other way around (i.e., with these limitations, what can we do?).*

Number Two: Discrete courses

In contemporary elementary school curriculums, subject areas are often linked and integrated through thematic instruction and reading or writing across the curriculum. Increasingly, secondary curriculum is being thought in terms of blocks of time and related subjects with team teaching taking place at all levels--all levels, that is, except the college level. At the college level curriculum continues to be thought of in discrete units of courses, taken once and possibly forgotten. Two themes which have consistently emerged in professional education standards are learning and development. Yet, these are areas that are typically offered as a course offered early in the teacher education program (these are also the courses which are on the chopping block at many colleges). Other areas of importance receive much the same treatment, if offered at all. It is not unusual for courses in multicultural education, special education, and reading to be offered once, if at all, in the teacher education program. The inherent message to education students is to learn what is needed for the course (which may or may not be related to anything else in teaching or learning), pass the exam, and move on to the next course. Little coordination exists across departments and sometimes even across courses within departments, leaving some content ignored because it is assumed to be covered elsewhere while other content may be redundant. The end results are programs that are fragmented with no overall sense for the development of the future teacher.

***Possible approach:** Open up lines of communication and coordination within and across departments. Administration needs to be open to providing compensation for coordination time and to be willing to recognize these efforts within the reward system. Colleges need to consider blocks of courses and the integration of areas across the program with teams of instructors working with cohorts of education students. Among other things this will help build accountability for the overall program and the teachers it produces.*

Number One: Failure to understand the nature of the teaching-learning process

Although I receive much gratification from student comments concerning how my course in educational psychology helped them, I also feel some satisfaction when students inform me that they are changing their major from education because they hadn't realized what all was involved in teaching. The teaching-learning process is very complex. Efforts to oversimplify the process do a disservice to the future teachers. Teaching is not a collection of activities or lectures. It is the interaction of form and content with learner constructions occurring within social contexts. It is curriculum, psychology, and sociology; to name a few. Lee Shulman once described pedagogy as the highest level of Bloom's taxonomy of the cognitive domain. This begins to get to the difficulty of the task of effective teaching. To successfully execute the task of teaching requires an incredibly high level of knowledge, skill, and reflection. To be a good teacher is a very difficult and time-consuming endeavor; to be a great teacher, a master teacher, requires a competent experienced individual at the top of the profession. In the teaching of educational psychology we often discuss the conflict between the breadth of content we need to cover versus the need to cover concepts with a level of depth that is meaningful for the education students all within a three-credit hour course. The answer, of course, is simple (actually simply impossible): we must do both, but we can't.

***Possible approach:** Teacher education programs must be viewed not as a collection of courses, but as one step in the development of a good teacher. It is not the first step. Education students enter the program with a wealth of knowledge and experiences that will impact their ability to grow through the program. It is by far not the last step. Teaching must be viewed as a developmental process that continues throughout practice. Professional development must be viewed as internal rather than inservice offerings.*