

Preparing the Next Generation of Teacher Educators

by Jamy Stillman & Lauren Anderson — June 27, 2014

Despite the relative prevalence of teacher education positions in university Education departments, relatively few doctoral programs prepare graduate students for teacher education work, specifically. As a result, new teacher educators often expend significant energy ‘on the job’ learning how to do the complex work involved in educating teachers. Increasingly, the creation of teacher-education focused doctoral programs has been held up as a promising approach for helping to regenerate teacher education. This commentary aims to share some of that promise, while also highlighting various factors that make creating and sustaining such programs so challenging.

PREPARING THE NEXT GENERATION OF TEACHER EDUCATORS

Despite the relative prevalence of teacher education positions in university education departments, relatively few doctoral programs prepare graduate students for teacher education work, specifically. Many university-based teacher educators—like other education faculty—hold degrees from programs that emphasize research and/or administrative training over apprenticeship into teaching and teacher education. Some teacher educators, in fact, report feeling they “ended up” in teacher education, as opposed to having enrolled in graduate school with that goal in mind or having focused on teacher education during their course of study (Olsen, 2013). Given the range of pathways—intentional or otherwise—into the profession, it’s not surprising that new teacher educators often expend significant energy ‘on the job’ to learn how to ‘do’ the complex work involved in educating teachers (Goodwin, et al., 2014; Loughran, 2006).

While these struggles aren’t new news among teacher educators, unprecedented criticism of university-based teacher education (Duncan, 2009; NCTQ, 2013), coupled with questions about how to prepare for impending retirements among senior faculty (CCTE, 2013; Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013; Hollins, Luna & Lopez, 2013) have brought greater attention to them. Though not without issue, this attention presents an opportunity to think hard about, discuss openly, and take initiative concerning the preparation of future teacher educators.

Increasingly, the creation of teacher-education focused doctoral programs is being held up as one promising approach for helping to regenerate teacher education: to enhance its quality *and* nurture new generations of teacher educators who can and will move the field forward. As practicing teacher educators with a combined eight years of experience teaching and mentoring graduate students in one of the nation’s longest-running Ed.D. programs for aspiring teacher educators, we understand that with promise comes peril and pitfall, too. This commentary aims to share some of the promise, while also highlighting factors that make creating and sustaining such programs so challenging.

POTENTIAL STRENGTHS

One obvious benefit of doctoral programs designed for aspiring teacher educators is that they attract students who have K-12 teaching and/or teacher leadership experience and aim to work in teacher education. This alone represents an important departure from educational pathways that direct (explicitly or implicitly) ‘lost’ Education Ph.D.s’ toward Education schools’ largest-scale, and arguably most demanding, foundational work—the preparation of new teachers. In fact, we’d argue that specialized programs have the potential to help (re)position teacher education as a *profession* and an *academic field* worthy of graduate study, apprenticeship, and specialization.

Enrolling graduate students who are or have been K-12 teachers and *want* to become teacher educators also affords opportunities for cultivating robust communities of practice. Unlike traditional doctoral programs that emphasize academic competition and individual achievement, our experiences suggest that programs geared toward preparing teacher educators can offer powerful spaces where students leverage existing (practice-based) knowledge to facilitate movement toward individual and shared, or field-wide, goals. Such goals have included, for example, working to improve teacher education beyond a ‘single-program’ focus, capturing in demonstrable ways teachers’ contributions to K-12 student learning, and building relationships across constituencies (e.g., universities, K-12 schools, community organizations). These communities of practice are bolstered by opportunities for authentic apprenticeship of future teacher educators *by* current teacher education faculty, what might best be described as ‘field experiences’ that are *proximal*, *guided* and *focused on* the development of professional teacher educator competencies in the context of authentic practice (i.e., practicing teacher educators’ courses, teacher development initiatives, and teacher-education-focused research projects).

Related to this, doctoral programs geared toward emerging teacher educators can support them to explore with *breadth* and *depth* the practice of *and* the research surrounding teacher education, as well as connections between the two—a kind of graduate study not necessarily found in traditional programs. Though our experiences suggest various factors—discussed below—pose challenges in maintaining a workable balance between research- and practice-based concerns, we

view the potential for research-practice hybridity as a key asset in cultivating learning opportunities that address teacher education's most vexing challenges.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutional challenges facing teacher education are well documented (Zeichner, 2005). Universities often value teacher education more for its revenue-generating power and less (or little) for the scholarship it stands to generate. These hierarchies of value connect to longstanding assumptions: that the work of teacher education is less intellectual, challenging, less professionally 'worthwhile' than other education work; that, as with K-12 teaching, educating teachers requires expertise in pertinent subject matter but not in the *pedagogy* of teacher education; and that teacher education *practice* can be carried out with little awareness of or connection with research. Such assumptions, in turn, are reflected in and perpetuated by teacher educators' heavy teaching and administrative loads vis-à-vis other faculty; the struggles teacher educators face trying to find time and support for research and scholarly pursuits; the inadequate resources available for facilitating preservice teachers' learning; and, as mentioned earlier, the thrown-into-the-deep-end phenomenon that leaves many teacher educators to figure out on their own, and on-the-job, how to 'do' teacher education work well.

Those who work in teacher education understand how institutional cultures and values—like valuing research more than practice and researchers more than practitioners—can undermine high-quality teacher education practice and research, both of which depend on robust, dialogical research-practice connections and *not* on status hierarchies. One salient example involves the ways that other graduate students and faculty perceive doctoral students who are interested first and foremost in teacher education. These aspiring teacher educators and teacher education researchers may, in our experience, struggle to garner respect from faculty or other students for their classroom-based knowledge/expertise or their teacher education-focused dissertation projects. Indeed, such students are often viewed as practitioners *only*, and in some cases assumed to be less academically capable than students with other interests. In addition, graduate students interested in teacher education often report being discouraged by other faculty from pursuing practice-oriented endeavors (e.g., writing in a practitioner voice and/or for practitioners, facilitating K-12 professional development, etc.) and often must look beyond course offerings to find spaces where they are encouraged to explore teaching and teacher education.

These tendencies raise hard questions about how to organize effective programs within institutional contexts that may hold values that contradict those held by teacher educators about the worthiness of their field and their intellectual work. They also raise questions about the sustainability/vulnerability of such programs, particularly in light of inequitable resource distribution—including distribution of tenure-track lines—and the impact of that distribution on teacher educators and their work. It's worth noting, for example, that teacher education-focused doctoral programs like the Teacher Education in a Multicultural Society Ed.D. program at the University of Southern California, the Teacher Education and Teacher Development Ed.D. program at Montclair State University, and the Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs in Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education at the University of Pennsylvania exist because of sustained, spearheading efforts among tenured teacher education faculty, who are recognized as highly accomplished educators and leaders in the teacher education research community.

This point about resource allocation connects directly to the specific promise and peril of providing top-notch 'field experiences' for future teacher educators. As with future teachers, future teacher educators benefit from opportunities to learn to practice under the mentorship of experienced teacher educators and, concurrently, to bring that practice into conversation with theory and research (Hollins, Luna & Lopez, 2013). Such experiences require deliberate design to ensure that they offer authentic apprenticeship that connects to coursework in generative ways, and that those providing apprenticeships receive *space*, *recognition* and *compensation* for that apprenticeship work. Otherwise, the day-to-day demands of teacher education work might understandably commandeer faculty time and attention, potentially marginalizing or undercutting apprenticeships' value. Also at risk here is asking already-burdened teacher education faculty—many of whom work without the protections and rewards of tenure—to 'do even more' institutional and professional labor 'for less.' Borrowing from the broader body of research on field experiences for future teachers, we advocate treating this essential, ongoing apprenticeship work with the urgency, respect, and complexity it deserves and ensuring the necessary resources to do the work *justice* and to do it *justly*.

As mentioned earlier, we believe that doing this work well depends on programs cultivating research-practice hybridity—what we might think of as balancing learning to "do" with learning to "know" (Goodwin et al., 2014). This must involve supporting graduate students to draw connections between their developing practice, on one hand, and research that offers insights into the pedagogy of teacher education, on the other; it must also involve supporting graduate students to become active teacher education scholars themselves, and to draw connections between their developing practice and this additional kind of "knowing." While the traditional status hierarchies that pervade many schools of education make the cultivation of research-practice dialogism challenging, there is growing consensus that such dialogism resides at the center of the (nascent) knowledge base for teacher educators (e.g., Goodwin & Kosnik, 2013; Goodwin, et al., 2014; Hollins, Luna & Lopez, 2013).

Though perhaps unsettling to admit, many of us in teacher education—even working in specialized programs—didn't experience ourselves the kind of doctoral programming and apprenticeship we want for and aspire to offer our own

students. For this reason especially, faculty involved in the design and realization of such programs need time and support to explore the emerging knowledge base, make authentic research-practice connections, determine course foci, reflect on and formally study their own practice, and dialogue with colleagues in other settings who are working *in* teacher education to develop programs with similar or related goals.

CONCLUSION

In sum, from our perspective, doctoral programs that foreground teacher education and embrace research-practice hybridity hold promise for strengthening our field. That said, developing and sustaining such programs *will* require significant and sustained resources and *will not*, alone, serve as a panacea for entrenched institutional cultures and status hierarchies that position teacher education as somehow “less-than.”

Therefore, we want to end by underscoring the importance of generating more widespread understanding of and support for teacher education work. This will likely involve strategic outreach—outreach that, for example, might include enlisting senior colleagues from within and beyond teacher education to educate others about the value of teacher education-focused doctoral programs that don’t claim a research *or* practice orientation, but instead work to embody *both*. It might also involve educating the broader field about the knowledge bases, skillsets, and identities that such programs stand to cultivate, since these may differ—indeed, *should* differ—from those held by graduates of more traditional doctoral programs. Such efforts will help to ensure that teacher education-focused doctoral programs can fulfill their promise to regenerate the field without perpetuating the very assumptions and conditions they aim to disrupt.

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