



The Discourse of Reform in Teacher Education: Extending the Dialogue

by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Mary Kim Fries

In response to Fenstermacher's and Furlong's commentaries, Cochran-Smith and Fries suggest three additional points to extend the dialogue about the reform of teacher education. They discuss the potential value of debates that marshal evidence for a particular policy position, the importance of open discussion about the ideologies that underlie different positions, and necessary cautions about the increasing role of the federal government in educational policy and practice.

We appreciate Gary Fenstermacher's and John Furlong's thought-provoking commentaries that continue the dialogue about competing agendas for the reform of teacher education. Fenstermacher offers several important insights about public policy debate and the role of government in education. He suggests that policy debates are not really about establishing clear winners and losers but are instead about highlighting and clarifying the options available to policymakers who—in the end—usually have to balance competing agendas through compromise rather than optimize one approach over all others. Fenstermacher also wisely points out that neither side in the current debate about teacher education seems appropriately cautious about the enlarged (and many would say, intrusive) role of the federal government in education that their positions seem to imply.

Furlong takes a different but equally useful tack exploring some of the similarities and differences between the teacher education situations in the United States and England. Furlong suggests that the most striking difference between the two is that the U.S. debate appears to be a "live" and open one; while, in England the deregulationists came to power through a "complex web of interlocking political networks" that gave them access to "seats of power" and thus precluded the need (and opportunity) for debate. Furlong reveals that the deregulation agenda has completely transformed the landscape of teacher education in England over the last 10 years despite the lack of open debate, a particularly chilling forecast for the United States because there are obvious similarities. Prompted by Fenstermacher's and Furlong's commentaries, we offer three additional points here to extend the dialogue about the reform of teacher education—the merit of gathering evidence for a particular policy position; the importance of open discussion about the different positions' ideologies; and the necessity of being cautious about the growing role of government in educational policy and practice.

Since our *Educational Researcher* article was written, the political debate in the United States between advocates of deregulation and advocates of professionalization has continued in much the same vein we described. A good example of this is the publication of the report, *Teacher Certification Reconsidered: Stumbling for Quality*, authored by Kate Walsh for the Abell Foundation (2001a), a private foundation in Maryland. This was soon followed by *The Research and Rhetoric on Teacher Certification: A Response to "Teacher Certification Reconsidered"* by Linda Darling-Hammond for the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2001). Like earlier reports by deregulationists, the Abell report concludes emphatically that teacher education "doesn't matter much" in terms of quality teaching. The report also claims that the research that supposedly supports the efficacy of teacher preparation is selective, out-dated, padded, technically unsound, and heavily reliant on nonstandardized measures. Darling-Hammond's rejoinder refutes these findings and suggests that Walsh's characterization of most of educational research as "flawed, sloppy, aged and sometimes academically dishonest" (2001, p. 13) is in fact a better description of Walsh's own research. Shortly following the release of the Darling-Hammond rejoinder, an Abell Foundation rebuttal (2001b) was released.

As we suggested in our earlier article, these claims and counter-claims are emblematic of the ongoing contest in the discourse of teacher education reform to establish "the evidentiary warrant," or the justification for policy recommendations, by focusing entirely on empirical evidence and at the same time undermining the evidence of the other side by pointing out methodological errors and faulty reasoning. Furlong's description of the situation in England reminds us to be grateful for the live debate about reforming teacher education in the United States, and we fully agree with him that the U.S. debate is preferable to the situation he describes in England. On the other hand, it is difficult to be grateful when the battle lines in the United States seem to be hardening, the discourse seems to be increasingly *ad hominem*, and in certain instances, the debate seems to be shutting down rather than opening up to a genuine exchange of ideas.

Perhaps it is possible to think about the current teacher education debate in a different way—similar to what Alice Rivlin (1973) referred to as "forensic social science."¹ In contrast to traditional expectations for social science, Rivlin described a new tradition of forensic social science in which

scholars or teams of scholars take on the task of writing briefs for or against particular policy positions. They state what the position is and bring together all the evidence that supports their side of the argument, leaving to the brief writers of the other side the job of picking apart the case that has been presented and detailing the

counter evidence . . . Forensic social science seems to me an extremely healthy development. It reduces the hypocrisy of pseudo-objectivity and hidden biases. If well used it can sharpen public issues and make social scientific research more relevant to real policy questions than it has ever been in the past. (pp. 61–62)

Rivlin added, however, that even forensic social science has to have rules that scholars abide by, including fair presentation of the facts, clear description of statistical manipulations and other analyses, and evidence that is made available for open examination by others. She suggested that when judging scholarly work as forensic social science, the evaluative question is not whether it presents a balanced and objective account but whether the authors make their position clear; present the evidence in a convincing, full, and fair way; and recognize (as well as deal with) major findings that seem to counter their conclusions. When these rules are followed and understood as different from those of traditional social science, Rivlin concluded that forensic social science could be quite useful in the realm of public policy and in the court of public opinion.

Rivlin's speculation that forensic social science might be a productive and healthy development is akin to Fenstermacher's suggestion that policy debates about teacher education are intended to sharpen our understanding of policy options rather than lead to a clear winner based on impartial and unbiased analysis of evidence. As Fenstermacher points out, in matters of public policy there are rarely clear winners. Instead, there are compromises that attempt to balance competing goods rather than choosing only one. Interpreting the opposing sides in the current teacher education debate as examples of what Fenstermacher calls "illuminat[ions] for policymakers [of] the various permutations available for optimization" (p. 20) and what Rivlin called forensic social science might help us to see the value of the debate in a new way. A new interpretation might also reduce the frustration, as Fenstermacher points out, when members of the educational community expect that a clear and obvious decision can and will emerge with enough hard work and good will among the debaters and scholars.

It is possible that reframing our understanding of the purpose and form of the opposing positions in the teacher education debate would clarify the policy options and illuminate the choices described. However, we think this could only happen if there were also open debate about the very different values and assumptions that underlie the opposing empirical positions. As we pointed out in our earlier *ER* article, as each side zeroes in on "only" the evidence, it constructs its own case as if it were neutral, apolitical, and value-free, based solely on certified facts and not embedded within or related to a particular political or ideological agenda. Along these lines, each side of the debate uses the term *ideological* to diminish the position of the other side and also to emphasize its own status as empirical (i.e., not ideological). As we tried to show, however, it might be more useful to acknowledge that both agendas are indeed (and inevitably) ideological; they are driven by ideas, ideals, values, and assumptions about the purposes of schooling, the social and economic future of the nation, and the role of public education in a democratic society.

Furlong's comparison of the scenarios in the United States and in England underscores the point that examination of underlying ideology is important at many different levels, including national

and international levels. For example, based on studies of cultural pluralism and policy options related to multicultural education in several nations, Lynch (1986) concluded that three different ideological orientations animated notions of cultural pluralism as well as their educational strategies. Important to our topic here is not Lynch's focus on cultural pluralism, but his larger point that ideology legitimizes and provides the "social moorings" (p. 7) for the national and state policies that evolve around particular issues. We believe that the teacher education community would do well to scrutinize the social moorings for deregulation and professionalization. A public debate of their larger political agendas is necessary because they differ substantially on ideological grounds even though they exist simultaneously within the same national arena.

Finally we would argue, along with Fenstermacher, that greater caution about the increasing role of the federal government in state and other educational policies is needed in the discourse about teacher education (and perhaps more generally). Fenstermacher observes that the discourse of both deregulation and professionalization "gives no hint that the protagonists are wary of the shifts in governmental role that they seek" (p. 22). The significance of Fenstermacher's caution is heightened by the recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, broadly considered a bipartisan achievement intended to raise the standards of educational attainment for all K–12 students. However, the bill has also been broadly criticized as an unprecedented intrusion of the federal government into state responsibility for providing public education. Indeed, the bill was referred to as "an egregious example of a top-down, one-size-fits-all federal reform" ("State Group," 2001) in a letter from the National Conference of State Legislatures to Congress. As Fenstermacher points out, both deregulationists and professionalizationists attempt to embody "their agendas in the laws and regulations of federal and state governments" (p. 22). This shared tactic is surprising in a certain sense, given the diametrically opposed agendas of the two sides. However, this is also worrisome because each side seems to be pushing for a certain amount of "over-regulation" of teacher education. This term is used by some critics to describe new government controls in the United States and elsewhere that seek to prescribe many aspects of teacher preparation and tend to circumscribe the autonomy and professional decision making of teachers and teacher educators (Cochran-Smith, 2001; Thiessen, 2000). We need more discussion about the appropriate role of the federal government in mandating state educational policies and procedures and in defining the boundaries of educational research. Fenstermacher rightly urges advocates on all sides of the current teacher education debate to be careful about the enlarged government roles they wish for when they lobby to have their agendas instantiated in state and federal regulations.

In the early years of the 21st century, teacher education is at a crossroads with unprecedented public attention focused on varying agendas for reform. An important factor in determining the future of teacher education will be the extent to which genuinely open debates about empirical evidence, notions of accountability, and underlying values and assumptions are encouraged and analyzed.

NOTE

¹ We first became familiar with Rivlin's term when James Banks (1993) used it to characterize the ongoing debate about the literary

canon, knowledge construction, and multicultural education, suggesting that the debate had become polarized and generally unproductive with various proponents not following the rules of scholarship and instead marshalling evidence to support a particular position

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