

From Teacher to Researcher?

Drastic Changes in Teacher Education and the Teaching Profession are Long Overdue!

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"Much of what we do, individually and collectively, is shaped by our personal histories" (Schoenfeld, 1999, p. 4). I taught English as a Second Language (ESL) both in school and college settings for fifteen years. This fact has definitely shaped everything that I do and given me the worldviews of a teacher. However, does this automatically imply that I do not have the worldviews of a researcher? I believe that a good teacher (and my intent here is not to claim to be a good one) should also be a researcher. "Teaching is an extraordinarily difficult and demanding profession. To do it 'right' demands very high levels of knowledge, skill, and dedication" (Schoenfeld, 1999, p.13). Dedication, which involves passion, is rather innate; as for knowledge and skill, they can only be acquired by learning (obviously), practice (experience), and keeping abreast with the research in the field. When teaching any topic, or even when seeking to improve their classroom management techniques, teachers are supposed to conduct research in order to find the best ways to proceed. They need to think analytically about how to appropriately apply theory to practice. So, how can there be a "cultural clash between the worldviews of the teacher and researcher" (Labaree, 2003, p. 13)? As Schoenfeld (1999) said, theory is supposed to help us make progress in a certain field (p. 5); it is what teachers need to be based on as long as they are practicing, not only later on, or towards the end of their teaching careers.

According to Young (2001), Metz (2001), and Labaree (2003), teachers are not researchers; education schools need to work hard in order to prepare them to become researchers. The three aforementioned authors are tackling the problem at the doctoral level, assuming that only doctoral students need to learn how to become researchers. Although I highly value their research and conclusions, I strongly disagree with their intended population. By targeting doctoral students in education, they are assuming that teacher education programs and the

teaching profession will remain the same; they are assuming that there is a huge difference between teaching and research, and that the two belong to distinct worlds: one is normative and the other analytical; one involves only practice, the other only theory.

It is high time we reevaluated our teacher education programs: “Instruction no longer focuses almost exclusively on the mastery of facts and procedures, but also on ... engaging in intellectual practices central to the discipline” (Schoenfeld, 1999, p. 6). Therefore, teacher education programs need to foster “intellectual practices” based on research from day one in the student’s journey towards becoming a teacher. What needs to be done is the following: promote a drastic change both in teacher education and the teaching profession on the one hand, and in the way teaching and research are viewed, on the other, so that there will no longer be a need to prepare teachers at the doctoral level to become researchers; the need should be to prepare education students (since their freshman year) to become teachers and researchers.

### **Change in Teacher Education and the Teaching Profession**

A drastic change in teacher education and the teaching profession involves two aspects: first, the preparation of teachers; second, the preparation of society at large.

#### **Preparation of Teachers**

Schools of education need to start preparing student teachers differently at the bachelor’s level with regards to knowledge and skills, and to the way they should view their profession and their rights.

**Knowledge and skills.** In the twenty-first century, teachers can no longer be prepared the same way as before; they need to be prepared for a new world of education; one that we are aiming to have based on our needs. In addition to the regular knowledge and teaching skills, teachers need to acquire research skills from day one. They should also be researchers so that

they can step back, from time to time, look at the big picture, and make sure that what they are doing is right; so that there won't come a time when they get bored of teaching the same thing over and over again: they do need the intellectual challenge/stimulation of conducting research, coming up with conclusions, and trying to apply those in their own teaching. Besides, if teachers want to talk the talk, they need to be able to walk the walk! How can they encourage their students (who most often seek--knowingly or unknowingly--to become like them) to be lifelong learners, to always seek to analyze and synthesize, to try to find solutions to problems based on research, if they do not, themselves, do so? Just as we lead by example, we also teach by example.

Teacher education should be designed in appropriate ways, “with enough depth and breadth to prepare creative and effective … [teacher/]researchers in the field” (Metz, 2001, p. 12). There should no longer be a transition from teacher to researcher; the transition should become from student to teacher/researcher. There should no longer be “a major change in occupational role [which] requires an accompanying change in professional priorities… [and a] shift in emphasis from the normative to the analytical” (Labaree, 2003, p. 19). Teaching should be both a “normative practice, which focuses on the effort to produce valued outcomes” and an “analytical practice, which focuses on the effort to produce valid explanations” (Labaree, 2003, p. 17) for the way teaching is done. In order for this to occur, student-teachers should be well prepared for both practices. If not, the education field as a whole will never really improve.

Moreover, student-teachers need to be trained to acknowledge their own limitations and adopt multiple perspectives. “Education only starts to become understandable when it is approached from multiple perspectives” (Labaree, 2003, p. 15). Student-teachers should be trained to see the value of alternative approaches (Metz, 2001, p. 15; Labaree, 2003, p. 15); they

should “learn an empathetic appreciation for quite different kinds of research” (Metz, 2001, p. 15).

**Teaching profession and teachers’ rights.** Teachers need to be encouraged from day one to ask for their rights: respect for their intellectual ability (and a say in the curriculum!), small class sizes, support for research, enough time for themselves, and good remuneration. Only when most school students start looking up to their teachers and wanting to become like them, only then will the teaching profession have received what it deserves.

According to [Ginott](#) (1965), teachers are the decisive elements in the classroom; they either make children’s lives miserable or happy. Then, we can safely infer that they are the ones who shape the future! Yet, and how ironic this is, they are the least respected, the least paid, the least given time for themselves; time to conduct the research that is supposed to guide their practice! The real problem does not lie in “irreducible differences in the nature of the work that teachers and researchers do” (Labaree, 2003, p. 13); it lies in the fact that teachers are not given the education and time they need in order to be good teachers who always seek to base their practice on the most current research in the field.

According to Schoenfeld (1999), “Teachers’ lack of professional status is a critically important social issue... There is a great deal of work to be done in making it possible for teachers to be accorded the professional status they should have” (p. 13), and this work involves preparing them to conduct research and giving them the opportunity to do so while teaching.

### **Preparation of Society at Large (Leaders, Administrators, Parents)**

No matter what changes teacher education programs bring to the field, not much can be accomplished if the society at large, mainly leaders, administrators, and parents, are not made aware of the urgency of the change in the way the teaching profession is going.

They need to be somehow pushed to give teachers their rights so that they can shape our future the way it needs to be shaped. “Cross-national studies show that teachers in other nations are treated as professionals... as we know, Chinese and Japanese students outperform ours by significant margins” (Schoenfeld, 1999, p. 13). We need to conduct as many comparative studies at the international level as we can in order to see why the US is lacking behind in education. Those studies can be used to show leaders, administrators, and parents how important it is to bring dramatic changes to the teaching profession.

### **Change in the Way Teaching and Research are Viewed**

Change in the way teaching and research are viewed involves the idea of synergy between teaching/practice and research. According to Schoenfeld (1999), basic research leads to applied research, then to development, and finally to use in practice (p. 9). So, anyway, the final objective is practice. Research should be inspired by both “a quest for fundamental understanding” and “considerations of use” so that there will be large contributions both to fundamental understanding and to practice. Educational research has, according to Schoenfeld (1999), already “evolved to the point where it is possible, much of the time, to conduct research in contexts that are of practical import, working on problems whose solutions help make things better and contribute to theoretical understanding” (p. 5). Labaree (2003) recommends that we “encourage teachers to carry out research into issues of practice in their own classrooms and to enhance the legitimacy of this work as parallel to the research generated by university professors” (p. 17).

In conclusion, instead of seeking to prepare teachers to become researchers, what we need now, in the twenty-first century, is to properly prepare students to become good teachers and researchers, and more importantly, to give teachers and the whole teaching profession their

rights. Besides, the field of educational research needs the teachers' expertise in order to find solutions to the daily problems that are encountered in the classroom. Without their participation, not much can be done. Indeed, "you can't fix problems of practice unless you have a deep and sophisticated understanding of the nature of these problems and of the contexts within which they arise" (Labaree, 2003, p. 17).

Schools need to give teachers the basic right of having enough time, support, and resources to be lifelong learners; to conduct research that aims at improving their teaching. On the other hand, we, teachers, need to keep in mind that, once we have chosen the teaching profession which highly affects other people's lives and shapes our future, we lose the option of refusing to improve ourselves by conducting research; we lose the option of refusing to be lifelong learners! Our lives now belong to the world; to the future. This is why teaching is a sacred profession and should be approached as such.

## References

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