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## Higher Standards for Prospective Teachers: What's Missing from the Discourse?

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## HIGHER STANDARDS FOR PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

### WHAT'S MISSING FROM THE DISCOURSE?

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The standards movement—and with it new outcomes-based performance assessments and high-stakes paper-and-pencil tests for teachers and students—will arguably have more influence on teaching and teacher education than any other contemporary agenda or innovation. Across the nation, colleges and universities are scrambling to provide evidence that teacher education is a value-added endeavor linked to student achievement, and in many places there is intense pressure to shift teacher education from an “inputs” to an “outputs” model.

Even the most ardent supporters of college- and university-based teacher preparation do not dispute that teacher education programs should be able to justify their value and that prospective teachers should be able to teach to high standards. But what's missing from the discourse of higher standards and more demonstrable outcomes? What's receiving little or no attention in the flurry to reinvent preservice education? Michael Fullan's (1993) *Change Forces* suggests one direction:

As we head toward the twenty-first century . . . teachers' capacities to deal with change, learn from it, and help students learn from it will be critical for the future development of societies. They are not now in a position to play this vital role. We need a new mindset to go deeper. (p. ix)

The way that teachers are trained, the way that schools are organized, the way that the educational hierarchy operates, and the way that education is treated by political decision-makers results in a system that is more likely to retain the status quo than to change. (p. 3)

Fullan (1993) insists it will take a new mindset to deal with what is an otherwise insurmountable problem—the contradiction of continuous change demanded by educational reform and innovation on one hand and an educational system that is fundamentally conservative on the other. Fullan argues that “change agency” is essential to the future development of our society and that all prospective teachers must be prepared to be effective agents of change.

Preparing agents of change was decidedly not the focus of the old teacher preparation. John Goodlad's major study of how and where teachers were prepared for the nation's schools (Goodlad, 1990; Goodlad, Soder, & Sirotnik, 1990) indicated that almost no teacher education programs included preparing teachers for change as part of their purpose: “Somehow, the idea that we are our own best agents of change and the will to act have taken a second seat to quiescence” (Goodlad et al., 1990, p. 398). So, what about the new teacher education? Does the standards-driven teacher education of the new century emphasize the preparation of change agents and demand demonstrations that prospective teachers know how to deal with, contribute to, and learn from change? Unfortunately, there is very little in the discourse of higher standards and demonstrable outcomes along these lines.

The emerging view of the reflective and knowledgeable professional teacher (Yinger, 1999) includes few if any images of teachers as

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activists, as agents for social change, and/or as allies for social justice. There is little in the new standards that suggests that prospective teachers are expected to challenge the current arrangements of schools and critique those teaching methods that are increasingly promoted as best practices for all students. The discourse of higher standards emphasizes that new teachers be able to teach (and prove they can teach) in such ways that all children can learn. But, there is much less in this discourse about classroom practices and ways of relating to students that are responsive to and culturally relevant for some students but look decidedly different from those being claimed for all. There is little in the discourse about new teachers' learning to critique standards-based K-12 education and the high-stakes tests that have hijacked the standards agenda in many schools. And, there is little emphasis on the importance of new teachers' learning to question whose interests are being served, whose needs are being met, and whose are not being met by "best" school arrangements including new curricula that emphasize test preparation above all else. Even if we accept the position that critique along these lines is indeed an essential part of what prospective teachers should know, there is almost nothing in the discourse of the new teacher education about preparing prospective teachers to negotiate the treacherous waters of proving themselves competent in first-time teaching positions while at the same time challenging some of the assumptions and actions that others take for granted.

The image of teachers as professionals who learn from practice and document the effect of their teaching on students' learning is a clear part of the discourse of the new teacher education. Experienced as well as prospective teachers are expected to function as reflective practitioners, work collaboratively in learning communities, and demonstrate that their teaching leads to increased student achievement. But, a narrow interpretation of higher standards—and one that is lurking beneath the surface of the discourse that heralds the paradigm shift in teacher education from "inputs to outputs"—

threatens the idea of teaching for change. As teacher educators across the nation develop the comprehensive assessment systems now required by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education and many states (see Wise & Leibbrand, 2001 [this issue]), an important challenge will be to eschew narrow views of teaching and learning, particularly linear views of teaching as instructional practice that leads directly to demonstrable student learning gains. It will be important not to leave out of this discourse a notion of teaching practice that extends beyond what teachers do within the boundaries of their classroom walls to include how they understand and theorize what they do as well as how they take on roles as members of communities, constructors of curricula, and school leaders.

What is needed and generally missing from the discourse so far are discussions of outcomes measures that—ironically—make teaching harder and more complicated for teacher candidates rather than easier and more straightforward. Such measures would recognize the inevitable complexity and uncertainty of teaching and learning and acknowledge the fact that there are often concurrent and competing claims to justice operating in the decisions prospective teachers must make from moment to moment, day to day. The new teacher education ought to make room for discussions about outcomes that demonstrate how teachers know when and what their students have learned as well as how they manage dilemmas and wrestle with multiple perspectives. Outcomes ought to include how prospective teachers open their practice to public critique and utilize their own and others' research to generate new questions as well as new analyses and actions. They ought to include how prospective teachers learn to be educators as well as activists by working in the company of mentors who are also engaged in larger movements for social change. This kind of discourse about standards and outcomes is essential if we are to prepare prospective teachers who—to conclude with Fullan's (1993) words—are "skilled change agents with moral purpose . . . [who] will make a difference in the

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lives of students from all backgrounds, and by so doing help produce greater capacity in society to cope with change from within" (p. 5).

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