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Three Turbulent Decades in the Preparation of American Teachers:
Two Historians Examine Reforms in Education Schools and the Emergence of Alternative Routes to Teaching
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Introduction

Until recently, the university-based school of education provided the usual path to becoming a public school teacher in the United States. Today, however, almost a third of new teachers enter the classroom through alternative means, whether it be through a school-district-based residency, an online degree, a for-profit certificate program, or a hybrid such as a charter-school-based apprenticeship. To put this in perspective: when A Nation at Risk appeared in 1983, only eight states offered alternative certification, affecting merely 0.06% of teachers nationwide. In 2016, alternative certification laws existed in forty-seven states, and somewhere between 20% and 40% of American teachers entered the profession through nontraditional routes. In places such as Texas, that number was much higher, hovering around 60%.

These less-traditional and sometimes confusing options have diversified what had been a unified landscape of university-based professional preparation, leading former Columbia Teachers College President Arthur Levine to describe the field as “something akin to the disorder of the Wild West.”

Unfortunately, advocates of specific approaches have developed the majority of research on the issue. University faculty have written research-based studies, most of which seem to conclude that the university is the proper home for teacher preparation and that the rise of alternative routes is a mostly negative development. Similarly, advocates for alternative approaches claim that education schools are hopelessly stuck and unlikely to reform, and that alternative routes represent the optimal way to prepare new teachers for twenty-first-century classrooms. What are we to make of all of this?

We–Fraser and Lefty–are historians of education and of teacher preparation. Surveying the highly-charged landscape, we concluded that it was time to ask a different question: Why—historically—did the relatively stable field of teacher education enter a time of so much radical change and acrimony beginning in the late 1980s? And a further question: how can that historical analysis inform how we understand debates in teacher preparation today? We believe that viewing the contentious trajectory of teacher education through the prism of history allows one to embrace the complexity and contingency of these developments, and to begin to understand the historical context that shaped reforms, reactions, and unforeseen outcomes. Our new book, Teaching Teachers: Changing Paths and Enduring Debates (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018) is the result (hyperlink to the book page at JHU Press, here).
Summary of Findings

Our research, which included detailed case studies of university education programs and a variety of alternative and blended programs, identified three main currents that led to the above changes in teacher preparation.

- It is true, as many university advocates argue, that the national and global growth of trust in market-forces and a free-market approach to reforming public entities—including schooling—has spilled over into teacher education. This embrace of what has been termed neoliberalism led many on the Right and on the Left to turn against institutions, especially public institutions, and to put their trust in private and independent initiatives. This approach was supported by public policy and private philanthropy at the turn of the 21st century.

- It is also true, however, that many—too many we believe—university-based programs resisted change and remain mired in a kind of self-serving mediocrity. While it is unfair to paint all university programs with this brush, and some did significantly redesign and improve their teacher preparation programs in the last few decades, we believe that too many teacher educators adopted a “this-too-will-pass” attitude toward the many calls for reform.

- Finally, we identified a third, less recognized, reason for recent shifts in teacher education: a “revolt of the superintendents.” Many district leaders lost faith in traditional education schools to prepare a sufficient number of high-quality educators. Consequently, some superintendents borrowed from the new, alt-cert models, to develop their own, district-based teacher preparation programs.

We explore each of these findings briefly below.

The Rise of Alternative Routes to Teaching: A Bi-Partisan Turn Towards the Market

Although our case studies of teacher preparation focus on the period between the 1980s and the early 2000s, it is important to note that movements for alternative certification started much earlier, as critics from both Left and Right sought to find ways around schools of education. On the Left, the National Teachers Corps recruited college students to the teaching profession as part of the 1960’s War on Poverty. Other early alternative models grew from the civil rights battles of the 1960s and ’70s, as communities of color became increasingly frustrated with the low expectations placed on students of color by a predominately-white professionalized teaching force. On the Right, the conservative supporters of alternative certification, such as Milton Friedman and Chester Finn, Jr., advocated fewer professional requirements and easier entry into the classroom for high-achieving undergraduates and career changers. “Markets work in education,” Friedman famously argued, and many Americans and politicians on both sides of the aisle came to agree. An important part of the teacher-education story, and one often overlooked, is that by the end of the 1960s many neoliberals and left-leaning communities agreed that the university monopoly was a problem.

The above arguments served as the intellectual and institutional precursors to the first state-level alternative certification program, in 1983. Before there was Teach for America (TFA), there was the New Jersey Alternative Certification, which engaged many of the major themes that would animate licensure debates for years to come. Proposed in response to a severe teacher shortage and the
perceived (and sometimes verified) “low quality” of the state’s education schools, the New Jersey program was approved in September 1984 after a year of rancorous debate. Previous law required teachers to complete a degree in education or a required number of education courses at one of the twenty-six state-approved programs. The new route allowed liberal arts majors to gain certification after passing a subject-matter test, fulfilling just twenty hours of pre-service training, and completing a year-long, supervised internship in a school while simultaneously serving as a teacher of record.

TFA arose out of this political zeitgeist and critique of education schools. TFA founder Wendy Kopp developed the idea for her organization while a student at Princeton University, where the teacher certification debate was already raging. As is well known, TFA encourages high-achieving undergraduates to teach for two years in the nation’s most underprivileged schools after five weeks of summer training. After TFA was born, alternative certification became a low-hanging fruit for politicians on both sides of the aisle. From the “education governors” of the 1990s to every U.S. president from Reagan to Obama, between 1980 and 2016, alternative certification became a generally accepted bi-partisan policy idea. Critiques during this period emanated mainly from education schools. They have been joined by some TFA alumni and other left-leaning circles since 2000.

Our book considers other alternative certification programs that grew in the wake of TFA’s popularity at the height of neoliberal consensus, including the Relay Graduate School of Education, whose founder Norm Atkins brought a “social entrepreneur” ethos to teacher education, claiming teacher preparation institutions must “act like Silicon Valley, not the car industry.”

The Response Within University Teacher Education Programs: “This Too Shall Pass”

As alternative programs were introduced during the late 1980s, intense debate grew among leading voices within education schools about the future of institutional doctrine and practices. In the spring of 1986, two reports - A Nation Prepared, from the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, and Tomorrow’s Teachers, the first of three reports from the Holmes Group - appeared almost simultaneously. These reports sought to redefine teacher education in the United States and bore strikingly similar recommendations, including a call to combine a new professional curriculum in graduate schools of education with an undergraduate liberal arts degree and to develop an in-school internship, or residency that extended the clinical experience well past the traditional, university-based norm.

The recommendations implied major structural changes; the status quo on many campuses emphasized methods classes, minimized liberal arts content courses, and included a relatively short student teaching experience. While some education programs greeted these reports and their recommendations with enthusiasm and began restructuring of their curricula, others rejected the recommendations as “elitist” or misguided, and opted to stick with programs similar to those they had offered in the 1960s and 1970s.

If we turn from national debates and examine what was happening on specific campuses, we find a range of responses to the reform reports and rising critiques coming from alternative certification advocates. In comparing three of the nation’s top universities—the University of Chicago, Stanford,
and Harvard—we observed divergent responses to the challenge of the 1980s to reinvent teacher preparation.

At the University of Chicago, for example, the faculty voted in November 1996 to close the Education Department entirely, viewing it more as a “collection of independent scholars and teachers” rather than a coherent department, with a small and marginal teacher preparation program. A Chicago high school teacher wrote a telling op-ed in Education Week after the closure decision entitled “The University of Chicago’s Education Department Will Not Be Missed,” writing that when university programs are “cut off from the real world of schools and teachers, educational research becomes arcane, irrelevant, and sometimes downright silly,” expressing a common and widely applicable sentiment. In the wake of what appeared to be the death knell for the field of education and teacher preparation at the University of Chicago, however, education made a powerful resurgence: in 2005, the University of Chicago formed an Urban Teacher Education Program (UTEP), independent of any formal education school, through which the University became a leader in the field of applied educational research and urban teacher education in the decade.

Stanford’s teacher prep programs came to prominence through a different route. Since the early 1980s, a steady stream of university presidents and key education faculty members have committed time and resources to teacher education, allowing a once merely tolerated program to grow into a celebrated model of university-based teacher preparation.

Harvard University, for its part, has maintained a checkered relationship with teacher education. Harvard pioneered the MAT degree in the 1930’s as a way to link rich content and professional preparation, but by 1973 discontinued the degree and teacher education entirely. In 1983, Harvard reintroduced teacher preparation, but it was on shaky ground; the education faculty nearly eliminated it in 2010. However, by the fall of 2014 the Graduate School of Education switched course once more and launched the Harvard Teacher Education Program, hailed by some as a “TFA alternative”: an undergraduate fellowship program that attempts to maintain the prestige and competitive acceptance rate of TFA (and Harvard) while “doing it right” in terms of preparation. It is too early to tell whether Harvard’s program will remain robust.

While elite schools have set the trends in the last few decades, they are not always alone, nor representative. Schools as diverse as the former state normal school Montclair State University and the private University of Indianapolis, and many other such institutions, have gone even further than Chicago, Stanford, or Harvard in rethinking teacher education, making it a more robust field of academic study while also moving from short-term experiences to year-long, in-depth, school-based residencies for their students. As Kathy Moran from the University of Indianapolis reflected, “We’d maintain we’ve been reformers all along,” a stance we corroborate in our research on their innovative curricular reforms. Our case studies convinced us that painting the whole field of university teacher education as an “industry of mediocrity,” as some do, represents a terrible disservice and a significant misunderstanding of what has been happening on campuses across the country.
On the other hand, it is equally important to acknowledge that, although some universities have seen major steps in new directions, others have rejected such moves through either inertia or, more often, through a deep commitment to their traditional practices. We encountered a widespread belief among education faculty that alternative routes to teaching and calls for major reforms to traditional programs represent a widespread assault on public education in which market forces have replaced quality controls and vulnerable students are sacrificed to “quick and dirty” routes to teaching. Some faculty affirm the merits of the traditional approach to teacher preparation, and in many places the methods courses have changed little since the 1960s. As Oxford University’s Harry Judge, a consultant to the original Holmes Group reform reports in the 1980s, wrote a decade later, schools of education “will change only when they really wish to, and not enough yet do.”

District Based Programs –or– the Revolt of the Superintendents

In February 2004, Thomas Payzant, then superintendent of the Boston Public Schools, spoke to a large audience of teacher educators at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. His talk focused on the question: Should teacher preparation take place at colleges and universities? Payzant’s conclusion was clear. He told the audience that he was not optimistic that college and university programs could do the job. He then announced a plan to create a district-based, pre-service program to compete with the university programs and, he hoped, better meet the needs of the Boston Public Schools students. Thus was born the Boston Teacher Residency Program.

The Boston Teacher Residency was the first of a nation-wide string of residency programs, mostly linked to—and managed by—large urban school districts including Philadelphia, Denver, Seattle, and many others. In some cases, the programs have merely a pro-forma link to a local university, while in others there is a deep partnership. In at least one—Seattle—there is also a strong connection to the teachers’ union. And in all such programs, the district superintendent plays a significant role.

We have called the emergence of these programs “the revolt of the superintendents.” As David Labaree effectively argued, there is a long history of American school superintendents having very different values from the majority of teacher education faculty. Specifically, while many university teacher educators trace their intellectual origins to the child-centered and teacher-friendly work of John Dewey, most superintendents see themselves as heirs of the so-called “administrative progressives” who are more concerned with centralized leadership and administrative efficiency. Many superintendents have thus been dissatisfied with education-school graduates. The rise of alternative providers offered a model with which superintendents could move from complaint to action. Some, like Payzant, now sought their own district-based programs that would reflect their sense of the district’s need.

And a Final—Surprising—Conclusion

In sum, our analysis did find intense rancor among the leaders within teacher education; university-based programs have been at odds with alternative routes, and some superintendents have found them both so wanting that they started their own programs. Nevertheless, despite the acrimony that many feel for one another other, the period from 1986 to the present has been one of extraordinary creativity and improvement in the way teachers are prepared for students of the twenty-first century.
As has been the case at other times in the history of American higher education, some of the greatest accomplishments have not been the result of cool and thoughtful deliberation on the part of all parties involved, but rather the result of frustration and loud debate. It is too early to tell which, of the innovative approaches, will yield demonstrably improved academic gains for students. However, we encountered many promising models across the spectrum of institutions. For example, the teacher residencies in Chicago and Seattle, and the partnerships between Teach for America and certain universities seek to combine the best of both worlds. We also found – discussed in full in the book, although not here– rare examples of programs that involve parents and community representatives in the design and implementation of teacher education that may strengthen the preparation of tomorrow’s teachers. The narratives we summarize here and relay in much greater detail in our book, reflect sometimes quite painful conflicts as well as energy, creativity, and—on some occasions—significant bursts of excellence.

Preparing Future Teachers - An Addendum
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I greatly appreciate the judicious essay we posted above from James W. Fraser and Lauren Lefty. Their account of a bifurcated teacher education landscape, with traditional education schools that too often resist reform on one side, and break-the-mold preparation programs of very differing quality on the other, resonates with evidence from the field. In this brief commentary, I would like to focus on the modestly hopeful observation made toward the end of their piece: “However, we encountered many quite promising models across the spectrum of institutions.” Given the widespread critique of schools of education (to which I have contributed over the years) it is important, I believe, to highlight several encouraging recent developments that bolster the findings noted by Fraser and Lefty. What follows is suggestive rather than exhaustive.

First, a new organization called Deans for Impact has brought together teacher preparation programs of very different kinds – state- and private-university-based, alternative certification programs, hybrid institutions such as Relay GSE (accredited as an institution of higher education but designed very differently than existing models) - to share findings, challenges, and future-facing projects. Characterized by a truly diverse membership, Deans for Impact is enabling its membership to undertake data-sharing and to publicize the results of its cross-sector collaborations.

Second, teacher preparation programs that share a commitment to a full year of clinical residency for teacher candidates have joined the National Center for Teacher Residencies and take part in an annual data survey that includes “critical research questions on student outcomes, teacher evaluations, and recruitment, selection, and retention.” I am currently working on a research project for the Walton Family Foundation which engages with several NCTR members, and can attest firsthand to the extensive, and very granular, nature of the data that are collected and shared across the very diverse programs.
Speaking of residency programs, the state of Louisiana has begun a state-wide transition for all teacher preparation programs to adopt a full year of clinical residency. At the same time, the state is moving away from course requirements and towards candidates’ demonstration of specific teaching competencies. Other states are following suit. As but one recent example from here in Maryland, both the state education board and the Commission on Innovation and Excellence in Education, which advises the legislature and governor on education policy and funding, are giving serious consideration to moving all teacher preparation programs to this model.

Finally, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), which many believed had undermined itself by calling for rigorous reform, is resurfacing after facing enormous pushback to its 2013 announcement of higher entrance standards and meaningful output measures. CAEP has given ground on the former but is still holding to the latter – and there is evidence that it is winning back states that had drifted away.

With all this said, one needs to close with Fraser and Lefty’s note of caution: “It is too early to tell which, of the innovative approaches, will yield demonstrably improved academic gains for students.” In this respect in particular, the field is under-developed. We have yet to see teacher preparation programs of any kind embrace serious accountability for the impact of their work in America’s classrooms. Of all the teacher preparation programs in the country, perhaps Alder Graduate School of Education alone is bucking the norm: it makes publicly available a number of outcome measures, and while it aggregates the learning growth of its graduates’ classroom students with other measures (such as principal surveys of those graduates), it at least publishes that aggregate set of results and indicates the components that are used in the aggregation.

But beyond laudatory early efforts in New Mexico, Louisiana and Delaware, the use of student learning data to hold teacher preparation programs accountable for the effectiveness of their graduates is rare. Many states do not even allow schools of education access to classroom-level student-growth data; the national resistance to the use of student-performance data to evaluate individual teachers disabled outcome by teacher cohort. Teacher preparation programs rarely call upon even principal evaluations, which are in near-universal use, to evaluate their own programs. Even when residency programs such as Urban Teachers (in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Dallas) solicit student performance data so as to evaluate programmatic quality, their requests are often undermined by red tape, political opposition, and/or bureaucratic resistance.

There are more than 1,300 teacher preparation programs in the United States. Even evidence that a hundred or so work hard to ensure that their graduates possess the complex skills, knowledge, and experience that are indispensable to effective teaching, would still leave the great majority still reliant upon academic course work alone. Of course, this is how medical schools behaved before the turn of the twentieth century. We have a long path still to travel.

1 Moreover, the academic course work is itself too often deficient. To give one example, as Deborah Ball and her colleagues from both the University of Michigan and Michigan State have shown, what we have been teaching by way of background knowledge in mathematics to would-be math teachers has missed much of what is essential – namely how math is actually experienced and (mis)understood by children.
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