Ideology and Reform in Teacher Education in England: Some Reflections on Cochran-Smith and Fries

by John Furlong

This article presents an international perspective on Cochran-Smith and Fries' (2001) recent analysis of the ways in which two competing ideologies are currently being employed in the United States in support of teacher education reform. In England over the last 15 years, teacher education has been fundamentally reformed and the arguments of both the "deregulators" and the "professionalizers" have been important in that process. Despite surface similarities, there remain important differences between the United States and England in how these two ideologies have been advanced and in the constituencies that have supported them. Teacher educators in England have been excluded from much of the public debate and the government has taken on the arguments of the professionalizers. What a comparison between these two countries demonstrates are the complexities involved in the globalization of ideologies.

There is a widely held belief in Britain that many of the educational innovations we enjoy (or suffer) start their life in the United States. But reading Cochran-Smith and Fries’ article “Sticks, Stones, and Ideology: The Discourse of Reform in Teacher Education” (2001) reminded me that at least part of this stereotype is untrue—ideas can go both ways across the Atlantic. Both of the ideologies they describe and their different “warrants” are only too familiar to those of us who have been engaged in the public policy debate about teacher education in England1 over the last 15 or more years. But before we get carried away with too simplistic an understanding of globalization, it is important to recognize that despite their familiarity, there are important differences between the United States and England in the way in which these ideologies have been constructed, who has appropriated them, and how they have been advanced in the reform process.

Perhaps the most striking difference revealed by Cochran-Smith and Fries is that in America, the debate is a live one. In England, there has been comparatively little public debate, despite 10 years of almost constant revolution, with wave upon wave of reform. During that time, almost every aspect of the shape and purposes of teacher education has been transformed. But in that process those in higher education—who traditionally might have been expected to lead such debate—have been marginalized and silenced. In achieving this revolution, the ideologies of both “deregulators” and “professionalizers” have been influential but often in rather different ways from those outlined by Cochran-Smith and Fries.

Within the educational policy debate in England, the deregulators first emerged in the late 1960s with the publication of the “Black Papers” (Cox & Boyson, 1971), a series of high profile critiques of progressive education. However, despite the support of a number of leading academics (not educationalists) and other public figures, it was not until Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979 that those behind the Black Papers began to be influential. And one of the areas of education policy where they quickly came to focus their attention was teacher education—the bastion of what was called the “liberal education elite.”

Interestingly, unlike their contemporary American counterparts, the deregulators in England in the early 1980s did not primarily advance their case through public debate; rather as Maclure (1988) and Ball (1990) demonstrated at the time, their influence was mainly achieved through a complex web of interlocking political networks that took them close to the seat of power. In these circumstances, public debate was not necessary. Moreover, the public arguments on teacher education that were presented in support of their position were limited. Lawlor (1990) and O’Hear (1988), for example, who were probably the most influential advocates of deregulation in teacher education, made no attempt to support their position through the appeal to any evidence. Rather their warrant was directly political, challenging what they called “producer capture” in teacher education whereby those in higher education managed the system in their own interests.

Although the English deregulators never achieved their ideal of a free market, it is hard to underestimate their influence in changing the landscape of teacher education in England. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, many reforms were made, many of which were inspired by this line of thought. As a result, student teachers now spend far more time in schools during their initial teacher preparation programs than they did a decade ago (66% for prospective high school teachers). And as a consequence, schools’ responsibilities in training programs (and the official discourse now exclusively refers to teacher “training” rather than teacher “education”) have been substantially increased. Higher education institutions have to pay schools up to one quarter of their gross income for their contribution with the result that the staffing structure of many university schools of education has been destabilized.

In addition, two new government agencies were established to manage the system and introduce forms of competition. They are the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), which now funds and manages all courses of teacher education in England; and Ofsted, the government inspectorate whose remit, as Lawlor (1993) notoriously put it, is collecting “objective evidence about schools (and teacher education courses) and reporting on their failings” (p. 7).
Throughout the 1990s, Ofsted and the TTA developed ever more rigorous forms of "quality control." Inspection results, combined with other course data (student entry qualifications, completion, and employment rates) are now published in the national press in the form of competitive "league tables." They are also linked to course funding, which has in turn led to the closure of a number of courses defined as inadequate. Inspection and other forms of evidence have therefore played a key role in the development of a competitive quasi-market (Le Grand & Bartlett, 1993) in teacher education. There may not have been the free market that deregulators wanted, but the disciplines of competition have been keenly felt.

However, within the Conservative administrations in the 1980s and 1990s, the deregulators were not alone in their influence. Equally strong, and increasingly so during the 1990s, was the aspiration of successive governments to seize control of the content of teacher education. Once those in higher education had been successfully silenced by the introduction of a competitive market, the opportunity to define the content became increasingly clear. This was an opportunity that was not lost on the Labour Party when they came to power in 1997. One of their first moves during their early months in office was to confirm the publication of competitive league tables of inspection evidence, thus maintaining the discipline of the market. At the same time, they took direct control of course content by setting out detailed standards or competences and a detailed "national curriculum" for teacher education covering content knowledge, pedagogy, and assessment in the fields of literacy, numeracy, science, and information technology (Department for Education and Employment [DFEE], 1998a). More recently, they have also introduced personal numeracy and literacy tests for student teachers in addition to more formal entrance qualifications.

What is interesting in much of this contemporary agenda is how similar it is to the arguments put forward by those Cochran-Smith and Fries label as the professionalizers. Like in many individual states in America, there has been a concern in England to define the "inputs" to teacher education in progressively more detail—entry qualifications as well as course content. There has also been an interest in output measures. Ofsted inspectors are now explicitly required to judge the quality of individual courses by judging the impact of trainee's teaching on children's learning.

Yet despite these ideological similarities, there are fundamental differences between the United States and England in relation to this professionalizing agenda. This is because in the development of this approach in England, it has been the government itself, through its central bureaucracies (TTA and Ofsted), that has taken the lead. These bureaucracies have defined the content; it is they who have policed implementation through rigorous inspection regimes. As such, public debate about this model has again been minimal; the model has merely been imposed. Moreover, professionals within teacher education have been fundamentally opposed to these moves, both to the fact that they are imposed and to much of their content. (The teacher education national curriculum for English, for example, with its prescription of methods of how to teach reading and the promotion of standard spoken English, remains deeply controversial.)

Unlike the United States, there has been little opportunity in England for senior academics to take a leading role in defining either the inputs or the outputs of teacher education. Therefore, far from being seen as an attempt to increase professionalism, these moves have been seen amongst teacher educators as attempts to de-professionalize teaching by challenging teacher autonomy and encouraging restricted rather than extended notions of professionalism (Hoyle, 1974). The struggle in England between the government and teacher educators has therefore become a struggle over what professionalism actually means and what form of professionalism we need for teachers of the 21st century.

For the current Labour government, what they call the "new professionalism" (DFEE, 1998b) requires a modern labor force with flexible working practices that is responsive to changing national policy priorities and has collective rather than individual values. By contrast, teacher educators have remained wedded to the view that prospective teachers need to be educated in ways that will allow them to work as autonomous professionals, capable of combining expert knowledge and values in order to make their own independent judgments as to what is effective practice.

Yet once again, much of this struggle has not been conducted in the form of public debate. During the 1990s, most teacher educators found practical course reform a constant and all-consuming activity. Given that change was imposed, there was little time for—or even point in—debate. However, they also saw course design as an important arena of agency. Therefore, rather than engage in public debate, course leaders have struggled to redesign courses in ways that conform to government demands while maintaining a commitment to extended notions of professionalism; they have done this by championing forms of reflective practice. In reality though, as my colleagues and I found in our 10-year study of change in English teacher education (Furlong, Barton, Miles, Whiting, & Whitty, 2000), such agency has been progressively curtailed. In recent years, the form and content of many courses has become increasingly bureaucratic and the opportunities for influencing the detail of what goes on in school—where student teachers now spend so much of their time—is limited.

In conclusion, what a comparison between England and the United States reveals is both the similarities and the differences in the policy process. The ideologies described by Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001) as underpinning the reform process are indeed very similar. Yet at the same time, a study of how those ideologies have been appropriated, by whom, and how they have been advanced reveals important differences. What that demonstrates, once again, is the complexity of the process of globalization. To quote Featherstone (1993), “One paradoxical consequence of the process of globalisation, the awareness of the finitude and boundedness of the plane of humanity, is not to produce homogeneity, but to familiarise us with greater diversity, the extensive range of local cultures” (p. 169).

NOTE

1 The position in the rest of the United Kingdom is different in important ways (Furlong et al., 2000).

REFERENCES


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