Reconsidering the Teacher Education Reform Debate: A Commentary on Cochran-Smith and Fries

by Gary D Fenstermacher

In the November 2001 issue of Educational Researcher, Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Mary Kim Fries provided a penetrating analysis of the discourse that comprises the debate between those who advocate highly professionalized teacher preparation and those who seek simpler and more abundant routes to teacher training and certification. This commentary extends the Cochran-Smith and Fries analysis in several directions, inquiring into the democratic and antidemocratic features of the debate between those who would further professionalize teaching and those who would deregulate it. Among the matters probed here are the importance of thoughtful opposition, how and where on the political landscape that opposition is resolved, and who is engaged in the resolution.

Commentary on the work of other scholars often achieves its goals by critical analysis of the evidence or logic of that work. That will not be the case here, as the analysis of teacher education reform initiatives offered by Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Mary Kim Fries (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001) holds considerable value for anyone trying to sort through the contentious debate between those favoring the professionalization of teacher education and those favoring its deregulation. Given their good work, what generates the need for additional commentary? I try here to extend the Cochran-Smith and Fries analysis in an effort to gain a better purchase on what is taking place in the policy debates over the education of teachers and their admission to the profession.

Four separate probes are used to set the framework for this analysis. The first explores the importance of having sides in a debate over public policy and explains why victory is not the object of policy debate. The second probe inquires into the possible consequences of where on the political landscape the debate is taking place. The third probe seeks a deeper sense of the meanings the various protagonists assign to the notion of teaching. The final probe examines the role of government in the resolution of the debate. These four moves are called probes because that is exactly what they do: They penetrate just enough to gain an initial sense of unexplored terrain, but not enough to constitute a fully justified account of that terrain. I offer the usual excuses of limitation of space in defense of this effort to be more provocative than convincing.

The Need for Sides

Academic readers may feel a measure of frustration with the professionalization–deregulation (P–D) debate, believing that there is a clear and obvious decision about which side is correct. Even if no clear and obvious decision is immediately at hand, it is often presumed that with sufficient diligence and good will, a clear and obvious decision will emerge. Problems of public policy generally have no such resolution, for, as Green (1999) notes, “when facing matters of policy, we face indecision because we confront a kind of question that, in principle, cannot be answered simply by any increment or improvement of knowledge” (p. 176, emphasis in original). Policy problems arise when important and valued goods conflict, “all of which must be pursued, but which cannot all be maximized” (p. 173).

Cochran-Smith and Fries assist us in seeing several of the goods in conflict in the P–D debate. Among them are equal educational opportunity for all children, high academic achievement by students, requisite opportunities for teachers to learn their craft and practice it effectively, the rights of parents and school children to make wise educational decisions, and responsible use of fiscal resources by lawmakers and school administrators. The policy problem is that we cannot maximize all these goods at once; the pursuit of one of them typically interferes with the pursuit of others. We require a policy resolution to bring competing goods into as just and harmonious a balance as possible. That is the point and purpose of public policy: To seek and fix an optimal inter-relationship among competing goods.

The search for a just balance among competing goods is often a torturous and messy process, one that usually leaves the various sides expressing some joy and some regret. Despite the often mixed outcome, taking sides is an important part of the policy formation process. As the sides express their positions, they illuminate for the policymakers the various permutations available for optimization. When the process works well, a just balancing of competing goods is the result. The achievement of a just balance means that there are no victors, in the sense that one side of the debate wins all while the other side loses all. Victory is the outcome of war; compromise is the outcome of politics.

We can hope that the defense of a side will take place with integrity and grace, but these characteristics seem in short supply in these times. Although we may properly lament the loss of etiquette, it is a small loss compared to the loss of all opposition. Indeed, a strength of democracies is that they allow opposing sides to become highly reactive to one another (even extremely angry), yet still manage to search for and find enough common ground to achieve a peaceable compromise. Although I maintain
that sides are important to the formation of public policy in democratic societies, I want to be careful to avoid the claim that all sides to a policy debate are equally meritorious, or that just optimizations are always the outcome of policy formation. Before addressing these considerations, we should consider where on the political landscape the P–D debate is taking place.

The Importance of Location

Our understanding of the P–D debate is enhanced by noting that it is taking place primarily at the national level, not in the various states nor in community or school districts. Like many other educational issues over the last half of a century, it has been “nationalized.” What is more, its primary participants do not indicate that they would have it occur anywhere else on the political landscape (such as at the state level or in school districts or within metropolitan areas, communities, or neighborhoods). Few question whether the P–D debate is taking place where it should or, alternatively, whether the debate might be waged nationally but the resulting policy formation might best be vested to the several states or local authorities. In politics, like real estate, location means a great deal.

There is a cost to democracies when decisions of consequence to all are appropriated at progressively higher political levels. The usual consequence is that those at the periphery feel disqualified from the debate and its resolution, thus experiencing a sense of powerlessness and concomitant disaffection. The qualities and qualifications of teachers for our nation’s schools are matters of deep concern to a vast number of American citizens, yet little effort is made to include them in this debate. Indeed it may be more accurate to contend that they are being excluded from it, inasmuch as the central characters show few, if any, signs of wanting to de-center the deliberation or share the power in deciding how teachers are qualified for their occupation. Why should they want to do that?

The first reason for wanting a more inclusive and politically distributed debate is to get as many people as possible engaged in it, thereby cultivating their stake in these matters of high importance to the nation and its children. In so doing, we nurture “networks of civic engagement” (Putnam, 1993) that produce the social capital essential to a healthy democracy. Another reason is that the issues may be more effectively settled at lower levels of governance than at higher levels, leading to resolutions that are not only more congruent with democratic ideals but more amenable to change as ideas and ideals shift over time. These are but a few reasons for being attentive to finding the right location on the political landscape for inviting membership in the P–D debate and resolving the various issues that frame this debate. Any expanded membership in this debate will likely need assistance with understanding the central concepts of the debate. One of these concepts is teaching, and the protagonists do not define it as well as we should expect.

Presuppositions About Teaching

The third probe asks what conceptions of teaching are held on either side of the P–D debate. As one peruses the literature that Cochran-Smith and Fries reviewed for their analysis of the P–D debate (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001, p. 4, Table 1), one rather easily gains the sense that for the professionalizers, teaching is a highly complex undertaking, while for the deregulators, it is a far more simple undertaking (perhaps no less elegant, as simple things may also have an aesthetic appeal). Thus the professionalizers argue that preparation for teaching should occur in collegiate settings with specialized programs, while the deregulators advocate entry into the occupation without specialized preparation. Is teaching the straightforward task it appears to be to the deregulators, or is it the sophisticated and complex undertaking that the professionalizers believe it to be?

The analog of flying an airplane is a useful one in answering this question. If the airspace through which the plane flies is neither congested nor regulated, and the plane has but one engine and a few seats, flying can be a fairly simple endeavor. If, on the other hand, airspace is congested and heavily regulated, and the planes that fly through it are huge, technological wonders, then flying is very far from simple. Policy advocates who presuppose that teaching is a relatively simple enterprise are often those whose conception of “education space” is simple, and thus the teaching that navigates this space need not be highly specialized. Those who presuppose that teaching is complex are typically those who perceive education space as tremendously complex and hence see a need for training and specialized competence to navigate it successfully.

These notions of simplicity and complexity, when set in the context of teaching and learning, offer a different perspective on what is taking place in the P–D debate. In the simplified educational space of the deregulators, it is relatively easy to draw an almost causal link between teaching and learning, whereby good teachers bring about learning and bad teachers fail to do so. In the more complex spatial representations of the professionalizers, the links between teaching and learning seem a great deal more vague. The professionalizers appear to realize that the connections are not strictly causal, but they also appear reluctant to openly assert that they are not, for fear of losing ground on what Cochran-Smith and Fries call the “accountability warrant.” The distressing consequence is that neither side offers us much in the way of insight into the richly multifaceted and highly complex relationships between teaching and learning (for a superb analysis of these relationships, see Lampert, 2001). Instead the collective presuppositions of what teaching is and what it means to teach, although somewhat differentiated in terms of the simplicity or complexity of educational space, are hardly differentiated at all in terms of the connections between teaching and learning.

The absence of constructive inquiry into the teaching–learning nexus allows for the easy politicization of this debate, wherein the deregulators typically become segregated into the political right, while the professionalizers are all too often lumped with the political left. This all too facile positioning on the political spectrum makes it difficult for those who identify with the political left to ponder and propound reasoned arguments for deregulation and for those on the political right to explore arguments for professionalization. The quality of the debate is thereby diminished.

The Role of the State in the Education of the Young

The fourth and final probe pertains to the proper role of democratic government in the education of the young. Any such inquiry should begin with what is perhaps the fundamental proposition of the liberal democratic state, the freedom of each individual to
pursue his or her own conception of what constitutes the good (note that liberal in this context refers to the primacy of individual rights and responsibilities, not to the political left). To preserve this freedom, a liberal democratic government must exercise extreme care with the commitments it asks its citizens to make to one or another form of living. It must also be exceedingly restrained in what it seeks to impose on its citizens by way of beliefs or any other feature of personhood that embodies a particular conception of the good. On this view of the liberal democratic state, a view that is deeply embodied in American history and heritage, the interests of the state (I use state and government interchangeably here) in education should be minimal. To return to the work of Thomas Green (1980), the state’s interest in education is to prepare children “so that they are neither on the dole nor in prison” (p. 22). Extending the mission and substance of the school beyond these minima is the province of the parents and the systems of schooling.

The P–D debate assumes a very different posture. A considerable portion of that debate (save perhaps for the deregulators stand on eliminating state licensing) engages the state in setting maxima for the educational attainments of the young. By pounding what are often referred to as “high and rigorous standards” and seeking their inclusion in law or regulation, the participants in the debate press for a far different educational role for the state, a role that shifts the state from setting the “floor” for educational outcomes to establishing the “ceiling” for outcomes. Indeed, one purpose of the nationalization of the teacher education reform agenda appears to be the embodiment of these educational maxima into federal law and regulation, or the use of federal law and regulation to compel the several states to adopt these maxima. The discourse employed by both the professionalisers and the deregulators gives no hint that the protagonists are wary of the shifts in governmental role that they seek. Indeed, the participants on both sides appear deeply committed to the embodiment of their agendas in the laws and regulations of federal and state governments.

Why should we be concerned about the moves that both sides make to represent their agendas in law and policy? The answer requires little reflection. Once the state embraces maxima, it does more than interfere with personal liberty and the unfettered pursuit of the good. It risks adopting and enforcing ideological positions, positions that easily evolve to reflect the convictions of those in power. The consequences may not be so hideous while those in power are ideologically benign or in close alliance with the citizen majority, but such conditions may not last long. Even when the conditions are benign, over a long period of time the risk of denigration or oppression of those without power or influence is very high. There are good reasons for the oft-heard remark that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance.

**Advancing the Debate**

Cochran-Smith and Fries have helped immensely in framing the critical tensions in the current policy debate over teacher education. The intent of this commentary on their work has been to probe various features of the debate in order to create an expanded context for its consideration. These probes were directed to the importance of having sides in a debate on the formation of just public policy, to some consequences that follow from where on the political landscape this debate takes place, to describing some of the implicit presuppositions the protagonists have of teaching and its relation to learning, and to fixing the proper role of government in the resolution of the debate. These probes suggest some considerations for advancing the next few rounds of debate.

The first of these is an awareness of what it would mean to settle this debate. I argued, following Green, that the debate is settled by effecting a just optimization of competing goods. That is not the only conception of policy resolution but it is one that turns our attention to careful consideration of what goods are at stake and how we want to balance them in the course of effecting a policy resolution. The second consideration is to attend far more carefully to the political geography of this debate and where we should vest the authority to resolve it. Local and state constituencies deserve high regard in any debates on educational matters, but may not find it easy to gain that regard in the current nationalized context. The debate is also likely to be advanced by a more robust and sophisticated consideration of the teaching and learning nexus. The challenge here will be to avoid both excessively simple and hopelessly complex conceptions of that nexus. Finally, the debate should be engaged with consideration of the proper role of government in the democratic state. Our chances for a more just and nurturing resolution of the debate would, I believe, be improved if we hold ourselves to a more enlightened conception of democratic governance than characterizes the present discourse.

**REFERENCES**


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