

# **Time for Conversations, Room for Reform: The importance of theory, history, and philosophy in teacher education programs**

**Karen Zaino**  
**Education**

“I am urging every teacher education program today to make better outcomes for students the overarching mission that propels all their efforts.”

--Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, 2009

At first blush, Secretary Duncan’s call to strengthen teacher education programs appears irrefutable; what can be wrong with better outcomes for students? As Duncan attests, today’s teachers are burdened with more demands than any others in the past: while dealing with larger and ever more diverse populations of students, teachers are simultaneously asked to “achieve significant academic growth for all students” (Duncan). No Child Left Behind, with its emphasis on high-stakes tests, is drawing closer to its terminal year. However, President Obama administration’s Race to the Top initiative, which asks states to make significant reforms in order to gain federal funds, suggests that the government will continue to support those states that show significant gains in test scores. Teachers will be expected to help students reach increasingly advanced benchmarks. Indeed, when the first Race to the Top winners were recently announced, only two states came out with passing grades, suggesting that most states were not even close to meeting the Education Department’s rigorous standards (Colvin). Such standards – whether for schools, state governments, or teacher training programs – are laudable, and certainly, educators at all levels should be asked to achieve high benchmarks.

At the same time, Duncan’s plea implies that “better outcomes” are *not* the current “overarching mission” of teacher education programs – that student learning and achievement are not the impetus behind hundreds of schools of education across the country (Duncan). Duncan does not specify what current programs focus on at the expense of student learning. But his ideas for improvement – which center on more rigorous training in the content areas and increased opportunities for hands-on experience in the classroom – imply that

programs currently forgo such training in favor of “subjective, obscure, faddish... out of touch [and] politically correct” pedagogical indoctrination (Levine qtd. in Duncan). Rather than student learning, Duncan suggests, teacher-training programs emphasize lock-step politics and poorly researched educational trends.

The problem with such a statement, however, is that Duncan himself is petitioning for a specific political agenda (couched in the speciously objective terms of “student learning” and “achievement”) and asking schools of education to conform to it. In fact, though, in order to avoid faddish curriculum and unburden themselves of their lackluster reputations, education programs *must* continue to provide their students with theoretical, historical, and philosophical understandings of education – the very concepts that Duncan dismisses as “obscure” and “out of touch.” Although Duncan presumably wishes to prioritize content knowledge and practical skills over educational theories and philosophies, these subjects are essential aspects of any program that wishes to facilitate the growth of effective and thoughtful educators – and, by extension, truly educated children. Duncan’s suggested reforms point to important potential flaws in teacher education programs; at the same time, it is important to recognize, in a way that Duncan does not, what *does* work about current programs in the academy.

Certainly, Duncan is not wrong to advocate for content knowledge and rigorous practical training. Many educational thinkers have called for similar reforms in teacher training programs, based on their belief that teachers are not as liberally educated as they need to be in order to efficiently transmit cultural and academic information to their students. For instance, Duncan actually refers in his speech to E.D. Hirsch, whom he calls the “father of the acclaimed, content-rich Core Knowledge Program.” Hirsch has been a long-time advocate for increased academic rigor in schools. Hirsch sees effective student learning as the successful acquisition of basic skills and culturally relevant information. He has said that “the names, phrases, events, and other items that are familiar to most literate American” create a body of information whose importance is “beyond question” (Hirsch x). As a result, teachers need to be experts in their disciplines, so they can effectively provide their students with this essential information. On his Core Knowledge website, in fact, Hirsch suggests a possible curriculum for pre-service elementary school teachers. The requirements include classes in a range of subjects, from chemistry to literature, and exactly one pedagogical course: Teaching Reading. Given Hirsch’s suggestions for teacher education, he would undoubtedly support Duncan’s call for more rigorous disciplinary education for teachers.

Mortimer Adler, an educational leader who pioneered the intellectually rigorous “Great Books” programs in schools, has also written in favor of content-area focus in teacher preparation programs. Pre-service teachers, he says, need a “course of study that is general, liberal, and humanistic” (Adler 59). He goes on to

explain that current programs “turn out students who are not sufficiently equipped with the knowledge” necessary in order to successfully teach students what they need to know (Adler 60). At the same time, Adler also argues that teachers need to be familiar with several types of teaching methodologies, depending on whether they are explaining facts, facilitating skill-development, or encouraging critical thinking. Thus, as Duncan proposes, pre-service teachers need practical experience. Teachers need “practice under supervision... [and not the] lecture courses in pedagogy and teaching methods such as are now taught in most schools” (Adler 61). They need practical expertise in the didactic, coaching, and questioning methods that are needed for each kind of learning. Thus, while Adler emphasizes the importance of content knowledge, he also acknowledges that teaching well requires a deep understanding of *how* to teach as well as the content to be taught. Duncan’s call for increased practical experience could provide what Adler considers the necessary exposure to the different teaching methodologies. Adler and Hirsch would both agree that schools of education need more rigorous content-area requirements and increased hands-on experience; indeed, few philosophers could argue with the importance of developing these skills in teachers.

Yet Duncan also makes clear his desire to analyze teacher education programs based on student performance on standardized tests. Duncan states explicitly that the Department of Education will reward and encourage those colleges that “use data, including student achievement data, to foster an ethic of continuous achievement.” Student achievement data will almost certainly mean standardized test scores. Because Duncan wants to be able to compare students, he must define progress as something distinctly measurable. Therefore, it seems clear that schools and states will continue to measure “progress” by examining scores on standardized tests – how else but by a numerical representation can students across the country be easily compared? Thus, although Duncan claims he is supporting “student learning” in favor of “faddish” politics, he is actually supporting the continued use of standardized testing to measure progress and determine the effectiveness of a child’s education (this in itself is a “faddish” decision, or, at the very least, a political one).

Standardized testing is undeniably useful, but as a sole measure of learning, it is inadequate. Nel Noddings, for instance, has maintained that genuine learning and achievement do not occur in settings that emphasize rigorous homogeneous standards. Noddings pioneered the concept of building schools around an “ethic of care” – of teaching students to develop skills in areas to which they are personally committed (Johnson and Reed 223). Noddings argues that school, in its current form, is not an environment in which “students learn to care for ideas” (Noddings qtd. in Johnson and Reed 226). Indeed, she says, students are not encouraged to care at all – whether for people, things, ideas, or themselves. Noddings points out

that not all students can learn all things; some students “will never understand the logic of a mathematical proof” (Noddings qtd. in Johnson and Reed 222). It is therefore the job of educators to ensure that students have the resources and freedom to pursue those subjects about which they feel most passionate. Teachers are not didactic instructors; rather, they are mediators and guides for curious students. They teach students how to learn and how to care. Duncan’s emphasis on standardized testing for students – and the more rigorous, standardized curriculum that would inevitably develop for pre-service teachers – will not allow students and teachers the freedom to explore the subjects they care about.

Noddings raises important points about the necessity of individuation in student learning and curriculum design. Her ideas have basis in other philosophies. Most notably, John Dewey argued extensively in favor of a progressive, more individualized program of instruction in favor of a strictly didactic approach. Dewey’s social constructivist approach to education has dominated schools of education for the past fifty years. Dewey points out, quite reasonably, that education is not “an *Either-Or* affair” (Dewey qtd. in Johnson and Reed 124); the educator does not need to choose between the child and the curriculum. Rather, the well-trained teacher examines the needs of the child and then presents the material accordingly. But the presentation of content alone is not enough. In fact, he says

...it is a mistake to suppose that the mere acquisition of a certain amount of arithmetic, geography, history, etc., which is taught and studied because it may be useful at some time in the future, has [a positive] effect, and it is a mistake to suppose that acquisition of skills in reading and figuring will automatically constitute preparation for their right and effective use under conditions very unlike those in which they were acquired (qtd in Johnson and Reed 126).

Recognizing that nothing is educative in itself, Dewey explains that a subject is educative to the child only when it is presented in a developmentally appropriate manner and within an individually meaningful context. Indeed, “it is not enough that certain materials and methods have proved effective with other individuals at other times” (Dewey qtd. in Johnson and Reed 122). Rather, education grows organically between student and subject, in a way that does a disservice to neither the student nor the subject.

Duncan’s suggestion that the quality of teachers and students can be measured – and his insistence that teachers rely on “proven” methods – is in direct opposition to Dewey’s very reasonable argument in favor of flexibility within the curriculum. In fact, Duncan’s selection of standardized testing as the major means

by which to measure student achievement necessarily narrows the definition of education. He argues that he is making an unbiased decision in favor of “student learning.” In fact, though, Duncan is clearly taking a political stand in favor of a standardized form of education – a form many teachers and thinkers would oppose.

However, Duncan has the right to make political decisions – he is, after all, a politician – even if some disagree with his politics. Even if Duncan is less than upfront about his partiality, all politicians must make choices that reveal their political beliefs. Duncan believes that standardized tests, content-driven teacher education, and teacher residency programs are valuable assets to our country’s education program. Some theorists, like Dewey and Noddings, support a different system, and many others, such as Hirsch and Adler, would speak in favor his suggestion. As Secretary of Education, he is required to take a political stance and organize policies around that stance – and the result will always be somewhat polarizing.

At the same time, though, Duncan’s stance in this case will negatively affect the quality and efficacy of education departments across the country. Education, while it is certainly tied to policy, is also an academic discipline, just like literature, astronomy, geology, and philosophy. As an academic discipline, education has a history: the ideas, theories, and philosophers that create the ongoing conversation about the subject. In order for a discipline to thrive as intellectually rigorous, though, it must not be policed. It must not be monitored to the extent that certain ideas are prohibited. Such prohibition drains a discipline of its intellectual lifeblood, which, for a practical discipline like education, will also have the very adverse effects on students and teachers that Duncan is trying so hard to avoid.

For Duncan clearly does view ideas that conflict with his own as “subjective, obscure, [and] faddish...” He proclaims an allegiance to E.D. Hirsch, but Hirsch’s “acclaim” is slightly more contested than Duncan lets on. Theorists have argued that Hirsch has little classroom experience, having spent his life in the academy (Squire 77); Stephen Tchudi has likewise pointed out that Hirsch has not provided research suggesting that basic skills education is successful. Yet in Duncan’s reformed school of education, the emphasis would be on student achievement and “rigorous” programs like E.D. Hirsch’s. These schools might even be assessed based on how well their teachers go on to teach students, which, again, would presumably be measured by standardized test scores. In essence, teachers would begin to learn to teach to the test – to protect the reputation of education departments, if for no other reason. In such teacher training programs, there may not be room for the voices of thinkers like Nel Noddings, A.S. Neill, Catherine Macaulay, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and countless other philosophers who have not necessarily developed “proven” instructional strategies. Yet these diverse voices, whether they are historical or contemporary, are nonetheless essential parts of any

educational curriculum; they allow for the creativity and knowledge that are necessary for genuine and authentically new reform to take place.

Education policy-makers, for instance, have notoriously short memories (Early and Schneider 307). Teachers with years of experience can tell the stories of the “reforms” they have witnessed: this year an emphasis on basic skills; then, in reaction, a rally cry for progressivism; finally, a few years later, back to basics. If teachers, educational leaders, and policy-makers had a better understanding of the history of education and the myriad educational philosophies that have been developed and studied since antiquity, perhaps they would be less inclined to seesaw between the same two pedagogical mistakes year after year (Darling-Hammond 344).

Moreover, in any discipline, real reform – that is, the “revolutionary change” of which Duncan speaks – comes from the multiplicity of voices speaking at any given time, the sheer diversity of the conversation. There is no evidence that focusing on a single political ideology – liberal or conservative – has ever resulted in anything other than the stagnation of creative and inventive thought. Duncan wants educational reform, but he presumably wants to exclude from teacher education programs must ideological and philosophical classes. In a curriculum devoted to content and skills, is there room for ideas like those of Noddings and A.S. Neill? Is there room for philosophers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Catherine Macaulay, when these thinkers have not developed methodologies that improve test scores? For Duncan, there does not seem to be. Yet educators cannot explore genuinely new possibilities for improving instruction unless there is a space for new, divergent thinking in departments of education. Educational philosophers, even those who have not developed specific curricula or immediately successful programs, can provide insight into the nature of human development, the mind, social organization, critical thinking, social justice, subject matter, and countless other important subjects in education – none of which Duncan values. Such myopic focus on standardization is not only a potential infringement on academic freedom; it may even stagnate educational thought and, as a result, limit possibilities for new ideas and revolutionary change.

Teachers need a clear vision of what they teach and why; policy-makers need access to a variety of ideas as they consider what might make successful reform possibilities; and academics and university students deserve the opportunity to learn not just what Duncan deems necessary, but what the discipline of education demands: sustained inquiry into a variety of ideologies and methodologies; the proposal and practice of new models; and the opportunity for genuine learning to take place at the level of the academy. As Duncan argues, schools of education should emphasize hands-on practice and frequent classroom visits and observations. But they should also continue to provide the pedagogical,

philosophical background in theory that Duncan dismisses. Once these theories are explored *in context*, they will acquire the meaning and relevance that they may currently lack. Such in-depth exploration of theory and practice may involve lengthening teacher training programs, many of which are no more than a year or two right now. The answer is not to remove theory from programs, but to combine theory and practice in a meaningful, lengthy, academic exploration of what it means to be a teacher.

Arne Duncan is not misguided in his belief that teacher education programs need increased respect, rigor, and economic support. He is not wrong to say that pre-service teachers must know content and need to be exposed early and often to life in the classroom. But Duncan omits from teacher education the philosophical, academic side of education, and that is the flaw in his proposal. Education reform needs to emphasize the balance between rigorous standards and flexible, inquiry-based methods. Only then will education remain a vital, intellectual experience at any level and for any person – teacher or student.

## References

- Adler, Mortimer. *The Paideia Proposal*. New York: Touchstone, 1982. Print.
- Colvin, Richard L. "How Tennessee and Delaware Won \$600 Million for Schools." *U.S. News and World Report*, 30 March 2010. Web. 1 April 2010.
- Darling-Hammond, L. "Instructional Policy into Practice: The Power of the Bottom Over the Top." *Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12 (1990), pp. 339-347. Print.
- Duncan, Arne. *Teacher Preparation: Reforming the Uncertain Profession*. Columbia University. Teachers College, New York, New York. 22 October 2009. Speech.
- Earley, P.M., and E.J. Schneider. "Federal Policy and Teacher Education." *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1996. Print.
- Hirsch, E.D, J.F. Kett, and J. Trefil. *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002. Print.
- Johnson, Tony W., and Ronald F. Reed. *Philosophical Documents in Education*. New York: Allyn & Bacon, 2007. Print.
- Squire, James R. "Basic Skills Are Not Enough." *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 45 (December 1987/January 1988), 76-77. Print.
- Tchudi, Stephen. "Slogans Indeed: A Reply to Hirsch," *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 45 (December 1987/January 1988), 72-74. Print.