Ground Level Reform in Teacher Education

Marvin Wideen & Paulette Lemma, (Eds). Calgary, Detselig Enterprises, 1995, 231 pp. ISBN 1-55059-191-6

If I were the tooth fairy of teacher education, I would leave a copy of this book under the pillow of every dean or decanal candidate. As a twist on that, I would return a year later and threaten to inflict serious injury if this was not being followed. That is how important I think this book is.

There are two central messages in this edited collection. The first is that reform from the ground up is most effective. The second is that it is possible to create new teacher education programs. This is certainly welcome news to those of us who serve, or who have served, on this battlefield. Change in teacher education programs has been marked by top down decision-making, which often divides the faculty and further alienates practicing teachers and teacher candidates. It is uplifting to read that collaborative change is taking place and that all of the educational voices are being heard. To illustrate the argument, the book presents us with seven cases of attempted change in teacher education programs. In my graduate classes in philosophy of education I have long argued for Fritjof Capra's notion that everything is connected to everything else. This is one of the central themes of this book. Teacher education cannot be improved if one segment is left out of the mix. In this case the message is that change in teacher education must be built from the ground up, as the title suggests. The contributors continually make the point that the voices of experienced teachers and teacher candidates are missing from the literature. When student teachers were included in the conversation in planning program development, another valuable perspective was gained which improved the changes. Examples of this are seen in Toronto, Tennessee and Ohio. Practicing teachers have also often been silenced. In this book their voices are central to the change process.

The trick of course is to get tenured faculty on side. Ways need to be found to ensure that the process remains consistently open to allow the various voices to be heard without alienating the established voices from within the institution which can stop, and indeed have stopped, change dead in its tracks. The message in this book is that collaborative change can happen, messy as it can be. Wideen and Lemma in their chapter argue that:

The move of teacher education to the university from normal schools has not improved teacher education in ways that may have been anticipated. Today the common perception holds that developments in teacher education have not kept pace with the expectations set out for schooling. Instead, traditions have grown up in schools of education that limit the effectiveness and potential of teacher preparation. (p.15)

Marilyn Johnson's "New Shoes for Teacher Education: Trying on Collaborative and Rethinking Diversity in Urban Schools" [Sic] struck me as particularly persuasive. She chronicles her school's progression from discussions where change did not include local schools to now where change was planned collaboratively. She states:

For many of us, working in these teacher education reform agendas has changed our university lives significantly. Before PDS (Professional Development Schools), I taught a social studies methods course and had little knowledge of what happened to my students in the rest of the program or in the schools. I now spend time in schools, know the teachers well in whose classrooms my methods students are working, co-teach my methods courses with teachers and co-ordinate my courses with other faculty and co-teachers. In addition, my teaching, research and service have been fused into a single focus on program reform and professional development. (p. 97)

Clearly, not all her colleagues have had similar experiences. In some cases research interest do not mesh with teaching. Time commitments and clashing faculty priorities are also factors. However, even when agendas do coincide, the process of on-going change as proposed in this book is not an easy nor quick one. Marilyn Johnson again: "Looking back I realize that it was unrealistic to think that we could instantly change conventional ways of relating to each other across our institutional roles or that we would initially be ready to construct collaborative goals . . ." (p.100). Despite this completely realistic claim, she still maintains that collaboration cannot occur without all voices being heard.

The problem is that often, teacher candidates get conflicting epistemological messages. The 'real' world metaphor plays both ways inside the university classroom and in the placement school. Britzman and others are correct to argue that in many cases, teacher candidates are put into situations for which they have been given no preparation. Despite the publicity that we do not train teachers anymore, the fact remains that it is still a mainstay of many programs, even to the extent that teacher candidates become vehicles for improving schools (p.21). We seem, as Kennedy notes, to be "caught in a vicious circle of mediocre practice, modeled after mediocre practice, of trivialized knowledge begetting trivialized knowledge" (p.21). Is there an escape and an answer? Yes, thankfully.

The cases in this book indicate that we cannot ignore the schools with which we work; that faculty members can change their practice and institutional structures; that the discourse can be shifted to include practicing teachers and teacher candidates; and that new programs can be constructed from appropriate structured experiences in which the talk of change is embedded in the practice of teacher education. If it is true that quality education is a must for our students, then quality teacher education is as well.

Living and working in the post-modern democracy which we inhabit appears to mean that change is a process of on-going conversation where meaning is

jointly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in on-going conversations in which all voices are included. What has made this, and continues to make it, difficult in teacher education, is that these voices are so diverse. That may be so, but we must, if we want teacher education programs to be meaningful, dive off the raft to help each other swim to the shore.

Bryant Griffith
Acadia University