The Predictable, But Unpredictably Personal, Politics of Teacher Licensure

Frederick M. Hess
American Enterprise Institute

Published in Journal of Teacher Education
May/June 2005
Volume 56, Number 3

100 Word Bio
Frederick M. Hess is Director of Education Policy Studies at the American Enterprise Institute and Executive Editor of Education Next. His books include Common Sense School Reform, A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom?, Spinning Wheels, Revolution at the Margins, and Bringing the Social Sciences Alive. He has contributed to scholarly forums including American Politics Quarterly, Social Science Quarterly, Polity, The Public Interest, Politics & Policy, Phi Delta Kappan, Educational Policy, and Teachers College Record. A former public high school teacher and professor of education and politics, Dr. Hess holds an MEd in teaching and curriculum and an MA and PhD in government from Harvard University.
Abstract

The politics of teacher licensure are neither complicated nor surprising. Those institutions, organizations, and individuals who have helped construct existing arrangements and licensing systems see their handiwork as sensibly ordered, if imperfect, with improvement requiring the application of higher standards, additional expertise, more fieldwork and partnering with schools, and more resources. On the other hand, those who would strip down much of the existing licensure apparatus—few of whom have any station or influence in the teacher preparation community—regard such efforts as tinkering that leaves established gate-keepers unchallenged, dissuades talent from entering the field, stifles challenges to the reigning orthodoxy, and inflates the cost of educational provision. Such critics would pursue new structural arrangements that allow aspiring educators to bypass traditional preparation institutions and thus diminish the influence of existing stakeholders. These disparate points of view are the normal, healthy result of the different experiences, worldviews, and incentives of the disputants. However, while disagreement is predictable and healthy, the resulting debate has been neither. The rhetoric has too often focused on imputing untoward motives and on ad hominem attacks. Such vitriol creates armed camps that jeer at each other across the divide and works to discourage nuance and/or reasoned compromise. It is time for a discourse conducted in a fashion more fitting to the task at hand.
The debates about teacher licensure have long reflected a grace, decorum, and rhetorical nuance more appropriate to the final weeks of a partisan political contest than to a substantive policy debate. Perplexingly, given the utterly unexceptional nature of the politics of the issue, the debate has turned into an often venomous dispute focused largely on the intricacies of data interpretation.

The clash between those who would defend licensure and toughen the preparation requirements that it entails (the “professionalizers” in their preferred parlance) and those who would downsize much of the accreditation and licensure apparatus (“commonsense reformers” in my preferred argot) has often entailed policy disputes taking on a personal dimension. This may, in part, be due to the reality that there is relatively little reliable information on the value or effects of teacher licensure and preparation. In what may be the most disinterested survey of the research on teacher preparation and licensure, the Education Commission of the States found in 2003 that just 92 out of more than 500 studies met the minimal professional standard of basing conclusions on “systematic observation rather than…opinion” and that the evidence on seven of eight key questions examined was nonexistent or inconclusive (Allen, 2003, p. 3).

My introduction to the personal nature of the discourse came in 2001 when, as an assistant professor of education at the University of Virginia, I wrote a policy brief titled *Tear Down This Wall: The Case for a Radical Overhaul of Teacher Certification* for the Progressive Policy Institute. The paper was unveiled at a National Press Club event in fall 2001, where the executive director of the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) joked, “For his own best interest, I urge [Mr. Hess] to consult with his dean about his call to end

---

1 It is worth noting that some prominent professalizers disagree with the thrust of the Education Commission of the States (Allen, 2003) analysis and argue that the research does indeed endorse licensure and preparation (Darling-Hammond, 2002; National Education Association, 2004).
the exorbitant monetary costs [of teacher preparation]…Hopefully, he will have alternatives to present…regarding other ways to pay the salaries of assistant professors, absent the student tuition dollars those prospective teacher candidates generate.” On another occasion, in an editorial in this very journal, the editor described the tone of one of my articles as “replete with melodramatic mixed metaphors,” “patronizing,” and imbued with “deeply disturbing irony” (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 371-372).

Now, I make no claims to being neutral in the debate over teacher licensure or to being a disinterested observer of the attendant politics (in the spirit of full disclosure, see, for instance, Hess, 2001; Hess, 2002; Hess, 2003; Hess et al., 2004; Vergari & Hess, 2002). Nonetheless, although critical of licensure and the professionalization agenda, I have always happily conceded that, “teacher education can be beneficial, that education courses can provide valuable training, [and] that there are many effective teacher educators” (Hess, 2001, p. 5). Ultimately, debates about teacher licensure and preparation should turn not on the merits or motives of particular actors but on how to construct a system that fosters excellence.

The politics of teacher licensure and professionalization are neither complicated nor surprising. Those institutions, organizations, and individuals who have helped construct existing arrangements and licensing systems see their handiwork as sensibly ordered, if imperfect, with improvement requiring primarily the application of higher standards, additional expertise, more fieldwork and partnering with schools, and more resources (Berliner, 2000; Sirotnik, 2001; Sykes, 2004; Wilson & Berry, 2001; Wise & Leibbrand, 2003). On the other hand, those who would strip down much of the existing licensure apparatus—few of whom have any station or influence in the teacher preparation community—regard such efforts as tinkering that leaves established gatekeepers unchallenged, dissuades talent from entering the field, stifles challenges
to the reigning orthodoxy, and inflates the cost of educational provision (Hess, 2004; Kanstoroom & Finn, 1999; Podgursky, 2004). Such critics would pursue new structural arrangements that allow aspiring educators to bypass traditional preparation institutions and thus diminish the influence of existing stakeholders. To varying degrees, members of these two camps disagree about the skills and knowledge that aspiring teachers need, how to cultivate good teaching, what effect various licensing provisions have on the quality of applicants, or about what the evidence says on these questions. Such conflicts are an unexceptional element of the American firmament—and can be found in disputes about issues ranging from land use policy and telecommunications to sugar and tobacco subsidies.

Quite naturally, the defenders of credentialing and licensure are largely housed in the teacher preparation institutions, professional associations, and state agencies that have shaped the existing regime. Meanwhile the critics of mandatory preparation are largely outside these entities and are frustrated by their sense that they lack influence within the status quo. In such conflicts, the established interests typically enjoy enormous advantages over their critics, as they are professionally organized, aided by coordinating institutions, and motivated by a commitment to the arrangements they have helped to construct. Of course, such “establishments” also present something of a sitting target, as their members are called on to justify existing arrangements, whereas their critics are free to issue critiques without bearing a similar burden. This exposed position has led to sustained skirmishing between the two camps, with outside critics like Checker Finn, Michael Podgursky, and Kate Walsh offering pointed critiques and the professional teacher education community dismissing these critics as gadflies or “conservative scholars…[who] think that teacher preparation is a waste of time…[and who] have not been informed by the latest research” (Wise & Liebbrand, 2000, p. 617).
The impasse is understandable. Teacher educators, preparation institutions, professional associations, and state licensing officials have worked hard only to see their motives, expertise, and station challenged by those who would have many aspiring teachers bypass longstanding arrangements or skirt established institutions of teacher preparation. Having devoted their careers to teacher preparation, they naturally regard attacks on their handiwork, proposals for radical models of alternative certification, or calls to dismantle the licensure process as hostile and unfounded. As David Berliner has noted, in typically forthright prose, “Because we teacher educators are not the fools we are sometimes portrayed to be, we fight for certain standards in our teacher education programs” (Berliner, 2000, p. 361). Critics watch these same efforts by teacher educators and see—rather than a commitment to quality—defensive ploys to maintain an outdated franchise, stifle dissenting voices, and avoid competition or external accountability. Who is correct? It depends on where one stands.

Formalizing Teacher Preparation

Disputes about how to improve teaching achieved a new national prominence during the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), as policymakers sought to ensure all children access to “highly qualified” teachers. NCLB marked the most ambitious federal intervention into deciding who is prepared to teach, yet legislators neatly ducked the substantial questions by largely deferring to state officials on how to define “highly qualified” teachers and how to identify them. In the end, this studied ambiguity provided a comfortable refuge for legislators while raising the salience of the longstanding debate (Ramirez, 2004).

This ongoing debate is not new. Its roots can be traced back to the early 19th century when locally elected citizen school boards or superintendents issued teaching licenses and states established “normal” schools to train female teachers. During the course of the late 19th and 20th
centuries, these normal schools evolved into teachers’ colleges and then state colleges and then regional state universities—all the while remaining the primary site of teacher preparation (Tyack & Hansot, 1982).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a loose-knit national network of professors, administrators, and state officials sought to standardize existing, erratic arrangements. Between about 1890 and 1940, these professionalizers succeeded in formalizing licensure at the state level, while increasingly linking licensure to the completion of “accredited” preparation programs predominantly staffed by professionalizers and sympathetic faculty. By 1937, 41 states had systems in which all teacher licenses were state issued, with most requiring teachers to complete approved preparation programs at colleges or universities (Angus, 2001).

After World War II, the National Education Association (then still a professional association) and allied organizations established the National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards (TEPS). In 1952, TEPS, along with AACTE and the National Association of State Directors of Education (NASDE), founded the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) to accredit teacher preparation programs (Rotherham & Mead, 2004).

Today, these same organizations are the institutional voices of teacher educators and teacher training institutions. Their investment in the existing regime of teacher preparation has been predictable and appropriate. After all, in the world of teacher preparation, only these organizations possessed the wherewithal to promote policy, monitor institutions, or fulfill the quasi-official gatekeeping function demanded by statute.

During the 1980s, A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) fueled concerns about the quality of teacher preparation, giving rise to heated debates
about how to attract and retain good teachers. One reasonable response to this challenge was to seek to specify new guidelines that would toughen up the existing licensure and preparation system. Most famously, this was the tack of the reports by the Carnegie Task Force and the Holmes Group, which trumpet the need for more required training, more funding for teacher preparation and teacher salaries, more integrated subject matter training, higher standards, and a tiered career ladder. Borne of these efforts was the National Council for Teaching and America’s Future (NCTAF), which soon became the self-professed champion of professionalization.

Aside from considerations of its substantive merit, the professionalization agenda proved politically useful for the teacher preparation community. It provided a common, professionally endorsed, widely acceptable platform for governors, university presidents, and education school deans that called for channeling more resources to teacher preparation and boosting the field’s prestige.

It is striking that the recommendations did little to assuage critics concerned about the culture of teacher preparation or opposed to having these programs serve as gatekeepers to the profession. In fact, with the passage of time, efforts to increase student time in preparation programs and institute new professional requirements actually aggravated the concerns of such critics.

Meanwhile, teacher preparation critics embraced alternative certification programs pioneered during the 1980s in New Jersey, Texas, and elsewhere, and Teach for America, launched in 1990. Whatever their merits, these programs meant critics now had concrete proposals to tout and were no longer relegated merely to sniping at traditional arrangements.

Critics of the traditional regime could now selectively cite these reforms when claiming that traditional licensure was unnecessary, ineffective, or an obstacle to recruiting talented
candidates. However, in adopting this course, critics risked signaling that any given alternative they hailed was the new and improved “one best” approach. Finessing that challenge—finding a way to replace prescriptions in place with a flexible model rather than an alternative “answer”—remains a prominent challenge as disputants grapple in the wake of NCLB.

**Debating Teacher Licensure**

With the passage of time, the institutions, associations, and regulators that helped systematize teacher education and licensure came to constitute a teacher preparation establishment. Among the most prominent of these players today are AACTE, NCATE, NASDE, NCTAF, the Association for the Supervision of Curriculum and Development (ASCD), and the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium. One can concede the admirable intentions and judgment of these groups and yet recognize that their role in constructing, ordering, and implementing existing arrangements creates an institutional preference for policies that steer candidates into teacher preparation, raise the prestige of teacher educators, and extend the mandated period of training. Such recognition does not require doubting that members of these groups believe that such steps constitute good policy.

Critics can grant goodwill and nonetheless regard the handiwork of these organizations as problematic, destructive, and requiring radical change. In particular, many critics are concerned that leading voices in teacher preparation—including John Goodlad, Linda Darling-Hammond, Nel Noddings, Marilyn Cochran-Smith, and Gloria Ladson-Billings—have unapologetically argued that teacher education is inescapably about championing certain values. As Cochran-Smith, former president of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and editor of the *Journal of Teacher Education*, has argued, “Education (and teacher education) are social institutions that pose moral, ethical, social, philosophical, and ideological questions. It is wrong
headed—and dangerous—to treat these question as if they were value neutral and ideology free” (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 6). Ladson-Billings, current AERA president, has said her personal vision of good teaching is promoting an “anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic…anti-oppressive social justice pedagogy,” despite her acknowledgement that such teaching will inevitably entail “unpopular and politically dangerous curriculum and pedagogical decisions” (Kumashiro, 2004, p. xiv-xvi).

Obviously, these thinkers and their colleagues have an absolute prerogative to promote norms and values as they see fit. However, it is important to recognize that when standards based upon these values become requirements that aspiring teachers must master or when teacher colleges embodying these views are empowered to determine who is qualified to teach, those who disagree with the norms will take issue with existing requirements. When teacher educators with strong normative beliefs are deputized as gatekeepers to the profession, as is the reality of teacher licensure, the stakes surrounding their convictions grow exponentially.

The norms and values of the dominant voices in teacher preparation, quite naturally, are embedded in NCATE bylaws, AACTE resolutions, and ASCD publications. The resulting norms and policies attract criticism both from those critics of teacher licensure and preparation who are critical of the values privileged within the world of teacher education and from institutional critics who recognize the utility of teacher preparation but question the value of measures that prohibit potentially effective candidates from entering teaching.

These two critiques of teacher licensure—one a cultural critique of the philosophical orientation of teacher preparation and the other an argument for paring back the regulatory role of teacher preparation—are intellectually distinct, though they often become intertwined in the course of debate. The cultural critique questions the intrinsic worth of teacher preparation
programs. The institutional critique asks—regardless of their merits—whether these programs should be deputized by the state as quasi-official gatekeepers, as in medicine or engineering, or whether they should play a less formal role, as in journalism or business management.

Despite the assertion that “deregulators” wish to “dismantl[e] teacher education institutions” (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2002, p. 3), the two schools of thought are not inextricably linked or even necessarily congruent. It is true that cultural critics have often suggested, or given the impression, that they would like to see education schools abolished (Rochester, 2002). However, the institutional critique merely posits that given the nature of teaching and the current “science of pedagogy,” mandatory preparation is an undesirable screen that deters talented candidates and stifles initiative without yielding offsetting benefits (Kanstoroom & Finn, 1999; Hess, 2001). Nowhere in this second school of thought is there the suggestion that teacher preparation programs should be dismantled or even forced to change. In fact, commonsense reformers explicitly recommend granting preparation programs more freedom to train aspiring educators as they see fit, with the measure of performance being the classroom mettle of graduates (Fraser, 2002).

A Vigorous, But Less Personal, Debate

As a political scientist, what I have found most remarkable about the politics of teacher licensure on both sides is the vitriol and assumption of ill intention. Deciding how to regulate the preparation of educators who will teach in schools funded by public revenues and attended by the community’s children is clearly grounds for debate that involves both educators and the larger public. We should expect the question to be contentious, as it is fraught with important values and has real consequences for educators, those who prepare teachers, and the general public. However, it should be possible to pointedly debate the questions without resorting to
personal invective, attacking one another’s motives, or recitations of research that make little
effort to separate good scholarship from bad. A worthy debate would embrace logical argument,
be open to lessons learned outside of K-12 schooling, and pay careful attention to the quality of
research used to buttress competing claims. Open debate about both ends and means is part and
parcel of making public policy in a democratic regime.

It is no surprise that those associated with teacher preparation regard what they are doing
as constructive and believe those currently in the sector are the best equipped to improve it.
Similarly, it is unsurprising that those outside the sector, uncertain of the competence of the
current gatekeepers, or more skeptical of professional expertise and good intentions, would seek
to reduce the influence of the traditional preparers and programs. There are no conspiracies here.

These disparate points of view are the normal, healthy result of the different experiences,
worldviews, and incentives of the disputants. The splits are not going to go away, cannot be
“worked out”, and cannot be cogitated into some kind of “consensus.” However, the fact that
disagreement is predictable and healthy does not mean that the manner in which we have
conducted the debate has been either.

What is not typical or predictable is the bitterness and hyperbole that characterize the
debate. Unhelpful and often offensive are the charges leveled by some self-styled defenders of
teachers and the education community that those critical of teacher licensure are part of an
alliance of “thugs” (Ohanian, 2003, p. 746) and “marketeers” (Cochran-Smith, 2003, p. 371)
who seek to turn children and schools “into sources of profit” (Kohn, 2004, p. 13), are “engaged
in a war against public schools” (Bracey, 2003), and hope to make teachers “dependent on the
test-prep materials…[provided via] contracts with McGraw-Hill et al.” (Emery & Ohanian, 2004,
p. 10).
At the same time, there is an unfortunate tradition of personal, inappropriate, and often abusive criticism aimed at teacher educators and colleges of education. Such critics have charged that “there is a built-in institutional vapidity in ed schools” (Rochester, 2002, p. 201) and fume that “faculties at ordinary ed schools…merely pretend to be learned….They do not look for, and do not achieve insight into their fatal flaws—arrogance, overweening pride, hypocrisy, [and] ineptitude” (Kozloff, 2001, para. 5-6).

However, in responding to such malicious onsloughts, the teacher preparation community does itself no favors by pretending that sharp critiques are necessarily malicious or illegitimate. Critics should not be deemed out of line for arguing that preparation programs may be undemanding, ideologically biased, or less than rigorous in screening candidates. If we are to have an honest and constructive debate, those skeptical of licensure or preparation programs must be able to question both institutional arrangements and the culture of teacher preparation without being vilified or excommunicated from the education fraternity. When even reasonable critiques are attacked as inappropriate, critics lose the incentive to self-police, and it becomes difficult for the media, policymakers, or participants to distinguish hysterical critiques from serious ones. However, it is equally incumbent on the critics of licensure that they pose their critiques in a manner that lends itself to reasoned debate—rather than as ad hominem caricature.

I am not suggesting that critics should bite their tongues when they see fit to criticize teacher preparation, teacher educators, education schools, or arrangements that permit the teacher education establishment to determine who may teach or what skills and habits of thought aspiring teachers must possess. Nor am I suggesting that professionalizers are obliged to use Milquetoast language in justifying their efforts, touting their preferred reforms, or responding to
their critics. Frankly, I am not known for having qualms about strong rhetoric. However, there is a vital distinction between blunt language and ad hominem attack.

Even if one disagrees with the views or practice of many teacher educators, little is gained by vitriolic attacks on beliefs or intentions. We can disagree on desirable policy and practice without imputing evil motives to our opponents.

It is not merely that the heated epithets are aesthetically unpleasing. No, the larger point is that this kind of vitriol tends to be self-perpetuating. It shuts the door on fruitful debate or understanding and is absorbed by the rising generation of advocates, thinkers, and practitioners.

In place of thoughtful disagreements that can be parsed, we create guarded camps that jeer at one another across the divide and make it difficult for reflective members of one camp to engage with the other. In the end, this is neither democratic policy discourse nor even a thinking community—it is tribal politics. And that’s not good for any of us.

Perhaps, in this new century, we can make it a point to try to elevate the manner of our debate. Does it matter? I think it does. Even those who recognize the might of institutions and incentives, like me, know that rhetoric and norms influence ideas and policy. We have had our era of reckless language and thoughtless insult—let us see if we cannot go forward in a discourse marked by sharp disagreements but conducted in a fashion more fitting to the task at hand.
REFERENCES


