

Swimming in Deep Waters

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ABSTRACT

The authors respond to a review of their book, *Teaching as a Moral Practice: Defining, Developing, and Assessing Dispositions*. The authors emphasize a vision of shared commitments for quality teaching whereby teacher-educators instill and nurture the wisdom and virtue that a moral teacher must possess in order to teach in a variety of circumstances where clear-cut answers do not exist. In addition, teacher-educators help teachers discern how, in that context, they should enact particular knowledge, skills, and commitments to reach desired ends. The key to enact this vision of teaching as a shared, moral practice is critical collegueship.

This article is a response to:

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ANYONE WHO WORKS with children or has children has experienced a scenario like the following: A child wants to swim in the pool, maybe even jump off the diving board, but is afraid to put his head under water. The parents do not want to let the child swim in the deep end of the pool or jump off the diving board until the child is more comfortable being in the water, head and all. The astute parents work gradually to help the child become comfortable in the shallow water, supporting the young swimmer with encouragement to first blow bubbles in the water and then submerge his head for one second at a time, then three, then eight. Only with heightened confidence and increased skill is the child ready to jump off the deep end, a successful endeavor. It is true that the parents could have just thrown the child into the deep end of the pool, but the child's desire to swim could have been squashed irreparably had he been unsuccessful due to unpreparedness and a lack of efficacy.

This scenario can be translated to many situations where an individual is attempting to expand his or her proficiency from one level to another, like learning to read, riding a bike, or conducting an experiment. The amount of scaffolding required depends on the skill and capacity of the individual and the space between the individual's beginning point and ultimate goal. Working with individuals in such a manner is a tricky business. Such work becomes infinitely complex when applied to institutions. When the distance between the starting point and the final goal is vast, the wisdom of jumping immediately into the deep end diminishes. The wisdom diminishes even further when the final goal is nebulous,

and those working to reach it are simultaneously deciding what the final goal should be while striving toward it.

In her review of our book, *Teaching as a Moral Practice: Defining, Developing, and Assessing Professional Dispositions in Teacher Education*, Barbara Stengel (2012) suggests that teacher education jump into the deep end to reach an ill-defined goal. She calls for a seismic shift in how teacher educators conceptualize and carry out the momentous task of preparing teachers for the complexities of teaching. Rather than "tinkering" (Stengel, p. 4) with

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: We would like to thank Barbara Stengel for giving such a thoughtful read to our book. We also want to thank our fellow TEAM-C members for their intellectual collegiality and the leadership of AACTE for supporting the endeavor. Most important, we express our deep appreciation to the case writers of *Teaching as a Moral Practice* for engaging in important work at their institutions and for sharing that work with others in the spirit of critical collegueship.

teacher education by first blowing bubbles called dispositions then holding one's heads under water for a few seconds at a time, Stengel calls for a new paradigm for the way we prepare teachers. What that paradigm is remains unclear, but she underscores that it is needed. We agree that we need more powerful ways to prepare teachers. Each of us as editors and each of our case writers has ambitious goals for what teacher education should accomplish. Like Stengel, we disagree with the practice of developing "slogans" of rhetorical import but substantive inconsequence. Yet, it does not seem realistic or wise to expect that the whole enterprise of teacher education just jump into the deep end.

Entrenched institutions and social policies with decades of intractability, conflicting demands, and stasis do not easily reach consensus regarding effective, worthwhile reforms. But this does not mean that we are relegated to moving around deck chairs on the Titanic. Like Stengel, we too desire that teacher education rest on "a richer understanding of teaching and teacher education as social practice, one that might convey or create a common moral and professional ground for the teaching profession" (Stengel, p. 2). This is a robust vision; the goals must be operationalized. How to achieve this vision and determine the specific goals is not straightforward, despite best intentions. It certainly will not be achieved quickly, despite the urgency to enact changes. Any serious changes must be purposeful and scaffolded, and they must take into account the present circumstances. This is where *Teaching as a Moral Practice* entered the conversation.

We appreciate the opportunity our colleague, Stengel, and the editors of *Democracy & Education* have afforded us to engage in a dialogue around what we consider to be essential qualities of teaching and learning to teach. Our aim here is to clarify and to expand upon some of the ideas in the published book. In this dialogue we would like to focus on three interrelated main ideas: (a) conceptualizing and crafting teaching as a shared practice, (b) what it means to claim that teaching is a moral practice, (c) how teacher educators can engage in critical collegiality to enact change.

In her review, Stengel refers to a perennial concern in teacher education: the lack of a shared understanding about what good teaching entails, specifically, what teachers should know, care about, and be able to do. In studying the education of professionals, Shulman (2005) argues that all professionals must develop habits of head, hand, and heart—cognitive understandings, practical skills, and a set of ethical and moral commitments to guide their actions. However, teacher educators are still grappling with what Kennedy (1999) calls the "problem of enactment" (p. 70)—how to help teacher candidates integrate knowledge, skills, and dispositions into a principled practice. In the last three decades, thanks to the work of the Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (InTASC), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and the Holmes Group, teacher educators have developed more consensus about the habits of mind by defining the requisite knowledge base for teachers. Programmatic variation in the nature and duration of clinical practice is evidence that teacher educators are still grappling with how best to develop habits of the hand. How best to prepare teachers for habits of the heart poses an even larger enigma; teacher educators certainly lack shared views about the

requisite moral commitments of beginning teachers, not to mention how those moral commitments should be cultivated.

Our broad purpose for the book was to focus primarily on this last set of habits, the habits of the heart, by considering how dispositions help teacher educators address the moral aspects of teaching. When we, as editors, initially issued a call for chapter proposals, our intention was to elicit cases, or authentic narratives, from different institutions grappling with conceptualizing, developing, and assessing dispositions (hence, the book's subtitle). We did not intend to present these cases as exemplars of best practices but rather as stories of the case writers' challenges, questions, confusions, and epiphanies. Neither did we did select cases in an attempt to build professional consensus around how dispositions can or should meld teaching as a moral practice. Rather, we wanted to present descriptive, in-the-trenches accounts that could "make meaning for the profession" (Murrell, Diez, Feiman-Nemser, & Schussler, 2010, p. 5) by illustrating what teacher educators are actually doing. Simply stated, we foregrounded the question, "Where are we now?" rather than, "Where should we go?" Both questions possess value. We chose to enter the journey at one juncture, and we are grateful for the opportunity to engage in further dialogue about how we think the journey should continue.

As we stated in the book's introduction, we initially received texts from our case writers that read more like academic articles or accreditation reports. This was a stark reminder to us that as a profession, we have been enculturated into fairly narrow ways of knowing, understanding, and then presenting what we know and understand. One of our epiphanies in working on the project was that although we are adamant about asking our own students to examine their growth over time, as teacher educators, we seldom engage in such an activity. Furthermore, when we do reflect on our work, very seldom is the reflection deliberately directed toward improving practice. Even in situations that seemingly require teacher educators to examine our own practice critically, whether as individuals or collectively, vulnerable honesty is not perceived as a strength. Journal editors, program accreditors, and tenure-review boards seek impact, success, and closure. In contrast, for this book we sought the gritty particularities of an unfolding process. We wanted to learn from the doubts and uncertainties of our case writers as they endeavored to use dispositions as a means to focus on the moral aspects of teaching. There are no prescriptions for this kind of work. Our case writers accepted the challenge to describe their understanding of not only *best* practice but *moral* practice and explain how they crafted or revised their programs to enact this vision. This took courage. Not only were they attempting to address the moral aspects of teaching in their programs, an endeavor that frequently draws criticism from all sectors of the political spectrum, the case writers were also willing to dialogue with us as editors as we pressed and encouraged them to be more honest, more clear, and more reflective.

It should be noted that, for logistical purposes, the case writers mainly worked with their colleagues and with us, rather than with one another. This is not unlike how teacher educators tend to operate within the profession. However, we did convene the

case writers on several occasions to share their drafts and thinking. We agree with Stengel that teacher educators have too few opportunities to collaborate in this way. Stengel is also correct that, with the exception of the University of Denver residency program, the case writers work in traditional teacher education programs.

Nevertheless, we selected our cases for diversity, purposefully choosing a group of writers representing a variety of institutions, considering size, type, demographics, and geography. Our primary purpose was to draw out the authentic, unique story from each institution, situated in a specific context, so that we could look across these different institutions and examine the similarities and differences in how they integrated dispositions into their programs and approached teaching as a moral practice. Working with our case writers in this way did help us answer the question, Where are we now? We address this next as we elaborate on how we situated the book in our own thinking around teaching as a moral practice. Working with our case writers also resulted in some serendipitous discoveries about, Where should we go? We speak to that question when we respond to Stengel's concern about the lack of shared commitments regarding teaching as a social practice.

Though we did not aim to develop a narrow professional consensus on the moral commitments of teachers, we did seek to outline a conceptual understanding of dispositions as a construct that joins moral commitments with habits of action. Contrary to what Stengel suggests, this proposition is not either/or, but rather, both/and. Thinking dichotomously of dispositions as either commitments or actions limits the power of the construct by overly categorizing the interconnected dynamic of knowing, doing, believing, and caring in teaching. Dispositions help us to conceptualize the moral dimensions of teaching as a profession by encapsulating what a fellow member of Teacher Education As a Moral Community (TEAM-C) cites as one's "sound professional judgment in action" (Dottin, 2009, p. 85), a concise yet generative conceptualization that already serves as a broad professional consensus. Though working separately from each other, the case writers at each institution espoused definitions echoing Dottin's conceptualization. Whether they defined dispositions as an aspect of professional identity ("who we are and how we behave" University of North Carolina Wilmington), a "choice to act" in particular ways (University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire), or as professional judgments that combine "judgments, behaviors, and reflections over time" (Winthrop University), each institution developed some semblance of a both/and definition demonstrating the robustness of the construct.

Furthermore, this robustness encompasses an underlying moral component, fundamental to the very nature of the construct. Teachers' professional identity, the choices teachers make, and teachers' judgments and reflections about teaching practice emanate from their values, beliefs, and sense of professional ethics. Schwartz and Sharpe's (2010) description of *practical wisdom* is useful for considering how dispositions can broadly be construed in teacher education and how dispositions reveal the moral aspects of teaching: practical wisdom "depend[s] on our ability to *perceive* the situation, to have the appropriate *feelings* or desires about it, to *deliberate* about what [is] appropriate in these circumstances, and

to *act*" (p. 5). Likewise, dispositions incorporate professional judgments teachers make in particular contexts, which guide the actions they choose to take. Such judgments and subsequent actions flow from teachers' moral commitments whether the teacher is aware of these or not. Therefore, dispositions guide how teachers think and animate what they do.

This conceptualization aligns with the notion of professional habits of head, hand, and heart. For the purpose of discussion, we often consider these habits separately, but when it comes to the practice of teaching, they cannot be separated. They function symbiotically and simultaneously. A person cannot reveal one habit without implicitly indicating another. For example, when we describe a teacher's ability to differentiate her instruction, we are describing her knowledge of content and instructional strategies, her skills in implementing multiple instructional strategies, and her commitments and inclinations toward meeting the learning needs of diverse learners. As Diez and Murrell describe in Chapter 1 and Feiman–Nemser and Schussler draw upon in Chapter 9, we view dispositions as a broad enough concept to encapsulate all three habits: "Because dispositions combine actions with moral commitments, they operate as an explanatory adhesive showing how the habits of mind, hand, and heart operate synergistically" (p. 181).

The case writers of *Teaching as a Moral Practice* grapple with this overlap especially as they describe their efforts to develop and assess dispositions. To situate our own characterization of the construct and to take stock of the extant literature on defining, developing, and assessing dispositions, the first chapter describes some of the tensions around dispositions that persist. We believe these tensions characterize the current challenges teachers face and indicate the lack of consensus around how we define quality teaching. We further note in Chapter 9 that the field lacks a theory of disposition development, which could help teacher educators think about how best to cultivate candidates' moral capacities and connect them to decisions and actions. If we believe that professional dispositions can be developed, then we need guiding ideas (theories) about how to cultivate dispositions-in-action.

Stengel is correct that we identify this need without offering a coherent theory of dispositions development. Rather, we point to evidence from the cases where case writers seem to have implicit theories about how to help teacher candidates develop appropriate dispositions and connect their commitments to their developing practices. For example, in several cases, the authors describe how they discovered that teacher candidates were able to articulate the desired commitments but could not always act on those commitments. Realizing this discrepancy led them to reconsider specific learning opportunities in the program, to rethink the role of mentor teacher and university supervisor, or to add new components. One group wrote about creating new opportunities for teacher candidates to confront their own implicit beliefs about race, class, and gender as a prelude to developing a strong disposition to see all learners as capable of learning. Another group wrote about the need to create better alignments between coursework and fieldwork so that teacher candidates see dispositions in practice and get help linking their values and actions.

Although we sympathize with Stengel's frustration that teacher education needs a bold new vision, we want to make it clear that the purpose of *Teaching as a Moral Practice* was to take stock of where we are. It is not that we don't desire a "radically different kind of practice" (Stengel, p. 4), a vision that Stengel herself fails to describe in her review. We agree with Stengel that it is important to at least envision what point B looks like, but it seems less likely that reaching point B will occur when there is a lack of understanding around point A. In other words, we have to understand where we are, if we are effectively to move to where we desire to go. Collectively, teacher educators must examine our own practice as this is fundamental to the process of change. In this regard, the editors and I were encouraged to discover striking similarities in the case writers' descriptions of how they implemented dispositions to address the moral aspects of teaching. As noted above, our case writers defined dispositions around a similar broad conceptualization. Moreover, the dispositions they identified have some common themes: teaching so that all students can learn; teaching as a collaborative activity; and demonstrating the interrelatedness of dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Furthermore, the case writers viewed dispositions as a means to fulfill their own moral commitments as teacher educators preparing candidates for quality teaching. What is important to emphasize is that in taking stock of where we are, evidence suggests teacher educators may be closer to consensus than what our critics like to claim.

Teaching is indeed a social practice, which should consist of shared understandings in a community of practice. The requisite habits of mind, hand, and heart should be common regardless of whether the teacher teaches in Nashville, Tennessee; Chicago, Illinois; Denver, Colorado; or Portland, Maine. The question is, how do we get to shared understandings? The quest for an individualized slogan may work against the acknowledgment of a common core in teaching and teacher education. As we have noted here, as the case writers in our book recognize, and as Stengel describes from her own experiences, the profession seems compelled toward such local branding. This is an easy trap to fall into. In an attempt to distinguish a program, be it through a pithy slogan or a thoughtful mission statement, it is easy to miss the essential commonalities that bind programs together as caretakers of the same profession. Shulman echoed this concern in a provocative general session given at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) annual meeting in 2008 when he proclaimed that if teacher educators do not define what the profession of teaching is all about, somebody else will do it for us.

Despite the global need to develop shared understanding of the core of our practice, teacher educators continue to work within our own institutional and policy frameworks with few opportunities to engage with colleagues in other institutions. Given the variety of external influences, some stable and many in constant flux—university missions, state accreditation standards, geography, cultural contexts, community demographics—it is no surprise teacher education units continually define and redefine their programs and, in so doing, we continually define and

redefine what quality teaching entails. As members of individual institutions, we often find ourselves adopting a reactive stance. This may occur when the process involves mostly rhetorical window dressing, inflated language meant to impress an external assessor. As members of a shared profession, teacher educators need to adopt a proactive stance. This occurs when our revised definitions reflect advances in our knowledge and understanding of learning to teach. Unfortunately, teacher educators have not done a good job of sharing our wisdom, and we have been negligent in developing mechanisms to facilitate conversations that can engender shared understandings of the core of our practice, including the moral aspects.

In addition, we must be mindful that one size does not necessarily fit all. Teacher education must walk a careful line between professional consensus and standardization. As teacher educators prepare candidates for the challenges and uncertainties of classroom practice, we must recognize that though we cannot prepare candidates for every particularity they may encounter, so should we not merely prepare them to teach to the middle. Teaching occurs in a particular context. In teacher education, we must first ascertain the shared commitments that characterize our profession. Then, we must determine how best to cultivate the knowledge, skills, and commitments teachers require if they are to reach desired ends in particular contexts. Korthagen (2004) rightly emphasizes the complexity of this endeavor when he notes, "Competence is not equated with competencies" (p. 94).

The key question then, is how to develop shared commitments that characterize teaching as a shared social practice and help prepare teachers for quality teaching? First, we feel we should articulate our vision clearly: Successful teacher educators instill and nurture the wisdom and virtue that a moral teacher must possess in order to teach in a variety of circumstances where clear-cut answers do not exist, and teacher educators help teacher candidates discern how, in that context, they should enact particular knowledge, skills, and commitments to reach desired ends. Second, we suggest some ideas regarding how teacher educators can purposefully engage in a process of change, taking into account the current status of teacher education. Two important insights that resulted from the book are: (a) Although teacher educators generally operate independently from colleagues in other institutions, we find it reassuring that there is burgeoning interest in how best to address the moral in teacher education. (b) Commonalities exist in teacher educators' thinking around how to conceptualize dispositions to meet moral ends in teaching.

Learning to teach is obviously a developmental process. Strong beginning practice looks different from accomplished practice, as the professional standards from InTASC and the NBPTS reveal. Developing our understanding and practice as teacher educators is also a process of ongoing learning. In working with our case writers through a series of conversations and revisions, we were all engaging in a type of self-reflection combined with collaboration, what Lord (1994) calls "critical collegialship." Our work as editors involved not just asking the case

writers to clarify their writing but, more important, asking them to clarify their ideas and to rethink some of their practices. Indeed, we were all thinking and learning together about how the conceptualization, development, and assessment of dispositions integrate moral practice into the fabric of teaching. The dialogue was bidirectional. It was also apparent that theory and practice had to make sense in the specific context of each set of case writers. It was their story, yet each story was capable of educating others. The case writers learned a great deal from each other on the occasions when we convened them as a group at national conferences. As editors, we learned a great deal from the case writers about our own practice and the common threads that exist in the field. In fact, the process of working on the book helped shape our own theory of change in teacher education. We recognized that this process involves making our practice public, subjecting our ideas to review and challenge from others, and taking responsibility for clarifying our language and justifying our practice. In short, we realized that critical collegueship is key to working toward shared commitments.

Since the book's publication, we have thought about ways to create such opportunities so that our profession can work toward shared understandings of teaching and teacher education as social practices. We mention them briefly. Recognizing the developmental nature of our work along with the value of professional dialogue and collaboration, we plan to implement some initiatives through the TEAM-C taskforce. For example, we offered a preconference workshop at the last AACTE annual meeting that enabled participants to learn from examples of how programs define and develop quality teaching, paying particular attention to the moral aspects of teaching. Part of this workshop included asking participants to consider how they operationalize their vision of quality teaching and to analyze and share a tool used in their own institutions to assess their candidates applying this conceptualization. To continue the conversation and foster critical collegueship with a wider community, TEAM-C members are constructing a web platform

with help from AACTE where teacher educators can engage in dialogue around conceptual or practical issues they face in their institutions, post artifacts and request feedback, and locate and comment on other institutions' artifacts.

Our vision is that through developing a community of practice across the profession, rather than just within one's institution, teacher educators can engage in a broader conversation that is both personal and shared. With the help of professional organizations like AACTE and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), we believe teacher educators, working in a wide variety of contexts, can create opportunities for participating in critical collegueship to enact a vision of conceptualizing and crafting teaching as a shared, moral practice.

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