Teachers for the New Millennium

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INTRODUCTION

They say if you drop a live frog into a pot of boiling water, it will jump right out. But, if you place the same frog into a pot of water at room temperature and then gradually raise the flame under it, the frog will not notice the changes and remain in the pot until it is cooked.

Now, you might ask, what is the connection between a frog in a pot and what a millennium teacher should know and be able to do?

My view of the connection is that there are events and processes happening around us every day. Most of the time, we do not pay them much attention because they occur so frequently or gradually that from moment to moment they do not seem to signify very much—like the gradually rising temperature in the pot of the cooking frog. Once in a great while, a potentially transformative event occurs and it makes us jump: September 11, Columbine, sending a man to the moon, or Y2K hysteria. Usually though, we conduct our routines and make our way through the day or the semester and tend to rely on the comfort of the familiar, seemingly unchanging, landscape. Yet, were we to carefully study and reflect upon that landscape, we might discern important trends that hold meaning for how we conduct ourselves presently, and in the future.

In terms of the specific professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions required of new teachers, I believe there are others who have done a much more effective job at identifying and describing them than I can. This information can be located at the Web sites of organizations such as the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS), and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

In this article, I wish to briefly identify four trends that I think will affect teaching, learning, and schools in the future. I am not so sure about their impact on the entire new millennium, or even the whole new century; but I do think they will be important over at least the next generation or so. I will describe factors in the wider environment that I think have the power to affect the practice and preparation of teachers, and comment on some of the challenges these factors may present.

INCREASING DIVERSITY OF THE STUDENT POPULATION

Racial, linguistic, and cultural diversity will continue to grow in the public schools. In addition, the numbers of students in special education classifications and alternative placements will likely increase. Cries for cost containment in special programs and the squeeze for classroom space within school buildings will result in more and more “non-traditional” students being placed in “regular” classes. Teachers will confront the need to become more adept at providing differentiated educational experiences for the multiple needs of students present in their classrooms, for diagnosing those needs, and for assessing student progress in multiple ways. Technology will offer much help in this area and teachers will be increasingly pressed to be proficient in its use.

It is likely that increasing numbers of adult educators will also be present in classrooms—co-teachers, support teachers, assistant teachers, paraprofessionals, and the like. Skills in team leadership and collaboration will increase in importance for classroom lead teachers. Student diversity will increase at a more rapid rate than diversity of the teaching staff. As a result, the need will rise for the teaching force, which will remain overwhelmingly white and female, to become more and more sensitive to, and adept at, simultaneously addressing differences in race, language, culture, and (dis)ability. Teachers’ repertoires of available knowledge, skills, and dispositions will be challenged to expand and become enriched. The abilities to affirm and coach one’s colleagues and students, in a spirit of solidarity, will likely emerge as highly desirable. These challenges suggest that prior to enrollment in teacher
education programs, greater attention to recruitment 
and pre-screening of candidates already in possession 
of desirable levels of vision, motivation, and attitude 
would be wise.

ASCENDANCE OF THE PHILOSOPHY 
OF THE MARKETPLACE IN 
SCHOOLING

“School choice” has fully penetrated the lexicon of 
both Republicans and Democrats. Increasingly, schools 
will be expected to compete for their students. Charter 
schools, magnet schools, theme schools, schools-with-
in-schools, mini-schools, and academies will continue 
to proliferate, as efforts will persist to dismantle what 
some call the “public school monopoly.” The better 
educated, more connected, and politically savvy par-
ents will tend to take the time and make the effort to 
ensure that they identify the best of these schools and 
differentiate them from the rest. They will also likely 
work hard to make sure their children attend them. This 
will tend to further separate our public schools into two 
tiers, each generally characterized by a different client 
population, one being at greater risk than the other.

The differing client populations in the “first tier” 
and “second tier” schools, regardless of their location 
in urban or suburban settings, will generate a variety 
of skill sets needed by the faculty in the schools. For 
example, “first tier” schools will tend to have higher 
levels of parental involvement. “First tier” teachers will 
feasibly have to manage high levels of parent participa-
tion, while “second tier” teachers will more likely focus 
on ways to increase parent involvement. Parents in both 
tiers of schools will care about their children; they will 
just manifest it in different ways. In another example, 
on January 15, 2003, Mayor Michael Bloomberg of 
New York announced there would be entirely different 
curricula and approaches to instruction in the city’s 200 
“first tier” schools and its 1,000 “second tier” schools. 
One-size-fits-all approaches to educating teachers will 
not work well in this environment. Teacher preparation 
programs will be challenged to become more market 
sensitive and provide for greater specialization.

Dual-Route Certification Policy

Since at least the 1960s, there has been both a front 
door and a back door into the teaching profession. 
The front door (traditional route) is through a teacher 
training institution; the back door (alternate route) is 
through some form of special program or provisional 
or emergency certification. Entrance through the front 
door is supposed to prepare the prospective teacher by 
providing a B.A. degree that includes subject expertise 
and the necessary skills, knowledge, and dispositions 
to at least begin teaching on a professional level. The 
most common back-door route is one in which teachers 
already have their B.A. in a subject field and are sup-
posed to get a great deal of on-the-job training while 
acquiring their skills, knowledge, and dispositions in 
condensed classes held after work, on weekends, and 
during vacations. Colleges and universities conduct 
early all traditional training programs. Increasing 
numbers of alternate route programs are being run by 
non-profit and profit-making organizations that may 
or may not be university affiliated.

Based upon the continuing shortage of hundreds 
of thousands of teachers our nation is experiencing, 
particularly in mathematics, science, languages, and 
Special Education, neither the front door nor the back 
door has been very successful in producing either the 
quantity or quality of teachers we need. However, 
the apparent success of programs such as Teach for 
America (which in 10 years has only produced about 
7,000 teachers) has caught the attention of policymak-
ers. Back-door programs seem cheaper and faster than 
front-door programs, because they tend to attract more 
mature and more diverse candidates. Because the results 
in terms of teacher quality are alleged to be better (or 
at least, no worse) than front-door programs, they have 
been growing in public support.

Possible challenges raised by this dual-route certi-
fication policy may include: 1) decreased demand for 
traditional college-based teacher training programs; and 
2) increased demand for existing, experienced teachers 
enter, one tier for new, inexperienced ones—both 
formally and informally. Experienced teachers will need 
to develop a new set of mentoring skills for adults in 
addition to their skills in teaching children. Further, 
they will need to organize their time suitably to take 
on this new responsibility and to perform it well.

Regardless of the route taken to certification, the 
initial years of induction into teaching will remain 
critical in terms of student learning from these early 
career professionals and the teachers’ decisions about 
remaining in the profession. Enhancement of the quality 
of induction programs will likely result in improvements
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