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Grounded: Practicing What We Preach

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Abstract

In this article we explore the challenges faced by teacher educators who struggle with the emotional and intellectual distance between their work in the university setting and the K-12 classroom. We consider the benefits of having teacher educators find ways to teach children and youth in K-12 contexts as part of their role as teacher educators--how living and working across both contexts can help revitalize a teacher educator's identity as well as improve the quality of his or her practice with preservice teachers. Finally, we suggest several models that provide teacher educators with the opportunity to work in both contexts.

More than anything, when we stand before our student teachers, we hope to convey that teaching is about the ongoing investigation of practice. Good teaching, we tell them, requires continuous learning about those whom we teach, how we teach, what we teach, and about how we, as teachers, are ever evolving. This dynamic sense of teaching is powerful and alluring. It speaks to the most important ideas of the profession: reflection, inquiry, and growth. We believe it in our bones and, as teacher educators, we imperfectly strive to live this view of teaching in our own lives and practice.

As university-based teacher educators, we have also in a fundamental way left our life as K-12 teachers. And so there are times when we look out at our student teachers and we feel like outsiders, pretenders—like former athletes relegated to the broadcast booth to provide commentary on a game that we used to play. The ache is complex and replete with bygone images of teacher educators far removed from the world of K-12 practice or consultants who would visit our schools armed with the latest innovations but too often clueless of our local context. Children's book author Elizabeth Nesbitt said that when she was a child, she used to "pray fervently, tearfully, that when I should be grown up I might never forget what I thought, felt, and suffered as a child." Nesbitt's refrain describes a fear that stalked our transition from K-12 practitioners to teacher educators: Would we forget about what we thought, felt, and suffered? Even if we did remember, would our archive of powerful memories suffice—especially because one of the first rules of teaching is to understand how context continually shifts and emerges?

In light of these tensions, we consider three related ideas: First, we believe that many teacher educators struggle deeply with the emotional and intellectual distance between their work in the university setting and the K-12 classroom. This distance is a source of professional frustration that can erode a teacher educator's sense of self and vitality. Second, we consider the benefits of having teacher educators find ways to continue teaching children and youth in K-12 contexts as part of their work as teacher educators—how living and working across both contexts can help revitalize a teacher educator's identity as well as improve the quality of her work with preservice teachers. Finally, we suggest several models that provide teacher educators with the opportunity to work in both contexts.

The Gap Between Teacher Education and the K-12 Context

Becoming a teacher educator involves not just a becoming but also a leaving. Teacher educators still teach, but they teach about a context they no longer fully inhabit. The typical teacher educator comes from the K-12 setting: More than 80% of education faculty have had primary experience in elementary and secondary schools, typically around 10 years on average (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Ducharme & Ducharme, 1996; *RATE VIII*, 1995; Zimpher & Sherrill, 1996).

Once inside the university milieu, several powerful factors pull teacher educators away from the school context (Holmes Group, 1986; Labaree, 2004; Levine, 2005). To begin with, they are expected to assume a range of professorial

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responsibilities that include research, teaching, service obligations, and collaboration across departments (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1995; Lunenberg, Korthagen, & Swennen, 2007). Furthermore, powerful status and hierarchy forces influence how teacher educators apportion their time and commitments to schools. On one hand, teacher educators believe in the efficacy of working closely with schools, but they also perceive "an inverse relationship between professional prestige and the intensity of involvement with the formal education of teachers" (Lanier & Little, 1986, p. 530). What emerges from this dynamic is a conceptual and curricular model of teacher education that outsources the heart of the process to K-12 teachers, who serve as the primary mentors or cooperating teachers.

The result of these jousting forces is a much-critiqued gap. As Jacqueline Hughes (2006) observes, "Some teacher educators are so far removed from the K-12 environment that WHAT they teach sometimes does not reflect the realities their students face" (p. 110). Levine's (2006) report *Education School Teachers* concludes that most schools of education are involved in a "pursuit of irrelevance" (p. 23), with curricula in disarray and faculty disconnected from classrooms and colleagues. Labaree's (2008) study of education schools contends that teacher education has an uneasy relationship with both K-12 schools and the broader university. He suggests that teacher education is a misfit: "Everyone picks on it: professors, reformers, policymakers, and teachers; right wing think tanks and left wing think tanks; even the professors, students and graduates of teacher education programs themselves" (p. 297). Our field's perpetual outsider status is summarized aptly in the preface to the third edition of the *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education* (Cochran-Smith, Feiman-Nemser, McIntyre, & Demers, 2008). The editors contend that in a world where education has become more indispensable and important to individuals and society, there is a growing consensus that teachers matter; that consensus, however, is not matched by a belief that teacher educators matter.

Closing the Gap

This begets a tough but pivotal question: How can teacher educators matter more to those learning to teach and to those with whom they work in the K-12 setting? Labaree's (2004) analysis of why being a teacher educator is so "extraordinarily demanding" focuses on what he calls the peculiar nature of the task of teaching itself. The core problem, he observes, is this: "Teaching is an enormously difficult job that looks easy" (p. 39). As Labaree explains, the heart of the teaching enterprise involves changing the behavior of a client who is brought to the classroom by compulsion. This relationship is intensely emotional, mostly conducted in isolation from other adults, and highly contextual. In other words, the crux of teaching happens within an intensely fluid context.

The mistaken notion that teacher education can happen without the teacher educator having a powerful and human connection to the context where a novice is learning to teach calls into question the fundamental design of conventional university-based teacher education.

In recognition of this disjuncture, the field of teacher education has endeavored to become more integrated with the context of practice in two ways. The first effort seeks to forge substantive structural connections between university teacher education programs and K-12 schools through formalized professional development schools (PDSs; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Goodlad, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, Exxon Education Foundation Forum, Education Commission of the States, & University of Washington Center for Educational Renewal, 1992; Holmes Group, 1986; National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 1996). The goal of a PDS is to be a "school for the development of novice professionals, for continuing development of experienced professionals, and for the research and development of the teaching profession" (Holmes Group, 1986, p. 1). These structures value collaboration between K-12 practitioners and teacher education faculty and embrace the idea of ongoing teacher development through the examination of practice, inquiry and reflection, and collegial problem solving (Levine, 1992). The model calls for K-12 teachers to work as colleagues with university faculty, who will contribute their time and ideas to the school's organizational planning, staff development, curriculum, and instruction (Holmes Group, 1986). The result, advocates of PDS suggest, is an energetic vitality of "two-way traffic" between the school and the university (Holmes Group, 1986).

Those involved in PDSs attest to their value; yet because of their complexity, connections between PDS activities and their effect on teaching and student achievement have been hard to discern (Abdal-Haqq, 1998, 1999; Castle, Fox, & Souder, 2006; Lefever-Davis, Johnson, & Pearman, 2007). Furthermore, studies conclude that PDS programs are expensive for universities in terms of faculty load and create a competing set of service demands for university-based faculty who are expected to conform to the conventional rewards system of higher academia. Finally, PDS structures are fragile and often hinge on relationships between leaders that can become undone when a principal or principal investigator moves on to another position or agenda. Although the premise of a PDS is appealing to many teacher educators, the logistical complexity of forging formal institutional connections makes this an unrealistic option in many teacher education settings.

A second effort by teacher educators to close the disconnect focuses on developing pedagogical practices in professional education that are grounded in the practice of teaching. Grossman and McDonald (2008) describe this approach as a rethinking of the activities of teacher education. The approaches developed include the use of case methods, video

cases, and teacher inquiry projects. The premise of this approach emphasizes connecting theory, subject matter, and practice within a context. Although many teacher educators use these approaches, Grossman and McDonald point out that they generally leave the development of contextually sensitive pedagogical skill almost entirely to field experiences—"the component of professional education over which we have the least control" (p. 189).

We want to draw attention to a third approach aimed at lessening the gap between our work as teacher educators and the K-12 setting, one that we have experimented with ourselves and describe in more detail below. One of our favorite volumes on the work of teaching is *The Elements of Teaching* by Banner and Cannon (1997). They observe,

> The teachers whom we remember most vividly are those who knew their subjects best and transmitted them with the greatest intensity and love. They were confident in their knowledge, and not dogmatic; they acted out their own struggles to understand in front of us, joyful when they understood something fresh, troubled when they did not or could not know. They joined us at the laboratory bench, in the library, at the museum, puzzling with us over a test tube result, complaining about a book's interpretation, discovering a painting's meaning. They stood before us to present the act of learning with a sort of honesty that we rarely encounter in everyday life. It is such examples of passion and exhilaration that students need in their teachers. Only in that way can students meet the importunate demands of learning with a full heart; only then can their thirst for learning move them on. (pp. 15-16)

We propose that there is much to be gained in a model that encourages teacher education faculty to join their preservice teachers at the lab bench. We call this model *grounded practice* and it describes an approach whereby teacher educators not only teach university-based classes but also extend their practice to the K-12 setting, with K-12 students. In a review of models of teacher education, Zeichner and Conklin (2008) conclude that they are "divided about whether the primary faculty should be academics or practitioners" (p. 269). Our intent is to think beyond the idea of division and imagine a "lab bench" where university-based teacher educators, student teachers, K-12 practitioners, and—most important—K-12 students are present and engaged in teaching and learning.

Grounded Practice: Integrating Teacher Educators on K-12 Ground

At its essence, grounded practice involves teacher educators integrating themselves into the K-12 setting—not as detached researchers, but as authentic practitioners—and

provides the opportunity for renewed connections with the context for which we prepare our students. This experience, we believe, offers multiple benefits for ourselves as well as the prospective teachers and university programs we serve. We suggest five such benefits below.

1. Revitalizing Self

Being a teacher educator has its share of disconcerting moments: those moments when our student teachers respond to us in ways that suggest they have come to see us as too removed from the nitty-gritty world of practice; those moments when colleagues from "higher status" disciplines in the university thinly veil their disparaging sentiments about what we do; the moments when we read the latest blue-ribbon report on the state of teacher education and see our work characterized as the "Dodge City of education: unruly and chaotic" (Levine, 2006, p. 110); the moments when a practicing teacher zings us with a comment about the cushy "ivory tower"; and the moments at our professional conferences spent listening to research treatises that feel too removed from the exigencies of the real world of K-12 schooling. The collusion of these moments hurts and exacts a toll.

At its core, this toll forces us to wrestle with questions of authenticity, the ongoing negotiation of our personal identity and purpose with the work and context of our teaching. Vital teachers—engrossed, tuned in, and purposeful—effectively navigate the ongoing, ever-shifting relationship between the self and the work. This vitality is linked to a set of ineffable, hard-to-codify qualities that can reveal itself to students as a quality of presence that we have called *vocational vitality* (Intrator & Kunzman, 2006). It includes an engrossment in one's work marked by a sense of dedication to the belief that the work is meaningful and purposeful. It includes a commitment to one's labors that organizational theorist William Kahn (1992) described as being "fully there"—a psychological and experiential presence that allows an individual to infuse his or her role and task performances with a sense of personhood.

Despite the fact that scholars have devoted meager attention to the serious study of education faculty as a whole—and even less to teacher education faculty (Ducharme & Ducharme, 1996)—we believe that a root strand of dissatisfaction that university-based teacher educators often experience can be traced to this sense of disconnect between their work in the university and their former work of K-12 teaching. The feeling that one no longer practices what one preaches can be disconcerting indeed.

We believe that regrounding in the K-12 setting can contribute to university-based teacher educators feeling more absorbed in the central action of their work. No longer a quasi-outsider, the teacher educator is now physically, emotionally, and intellectually situated in the immediate K-12 environment. This expansion of identity involves inviting into one's

sense of self the vast and complex range of responses that come with K-12 teaching. We do not mean to imply that the return to the K-12 classroom will be easy or that revitalization will occur only if such a foray meets with unqualified success. To return means that one will invariably encounter the constellation of what it means to teach: frustration, vulnerability, anxiety, satisfaction, fulfillment, and more. We believe that grounded practice can contribute to teacher educators feeling as if they are still part of the crucial story that happens on the ground with K-12 students—and thus help their sense of vocational purpose resonate more fully with the work they do from day to day.

2. Relating in the Present Tense

If teaching in the same contexts as our preservice students simply restored our own sense of vocational vitality, this would be reason enough to step out and do so. But, we believe that the benefits extend directly to our university teaching as well. Consider the many questions about nuts-and-bolts practice that a preservice teacher might ask during one of the teacher education courses. There are times when it makes sense to point our students to research findings or theoretical frameworks. Other times, however, a simple example drawn from our own K-12 experience is most effective in providing a concrete illustration of pedagogy in practice. We might begin, "Well, I remember when I was teaching. . . ."

Now, consider how much more weight our illustrations would carry if we could say instead, "Just that issue arose in my sixth-grade class yesterday." The message becomes, "Not only have I *been* there, but I *am* there on a regular basis. I haven't left the context that I am preparing you to inhabit." As simple as it may sound, we believe that having current examples of our K-12 practice offers a profound statement of presence and passion and provides a degree of credibility and relevance that preservice students frequently assert is lacking in their teacher education coursework.

But, the significance of "relating in the present tense" extends well beyond our capacity to pepper our illustrations of pedagogical concepts with contemporary classroom examples. Deborah Britzman (2003) warns of "the deceitfully simplistic knowledge of the world and of human beings that teacher education reproduces" (p. 46). Our ongoing work with K-12 students can help keep us focused on the central importance of relationships in teaching (Hawkins, 1974; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noddings, 2003). As Grossman and McDonald (2008) point out, relatively little attention is paid in research literature to the connection between establishing pedagogical relationships with students and how this contributes to student learning. Teacher educators who can trace the ever-shifting, constantly evolving connections in their own K-12 practice between relationships with their students and those students' learning can help fill that gap for their preservice teachers.

Being able to tailor our pedagogy in response to complex relational variables also requires a deep and flexible understanding of subject matter (Darling-Hammond, 1997). The learning context is always shifting, requiring interpretation, judgment, reflection, and adjustment. It's easy to lose a sense of how wildly complicated this context is when we've been away from it for a while. Of course, many teacher educators regularly visit the teaching contexts for which they are preparing their preservice students—conducting classroom observations, meeting with teachers and administrators, even conducting site-based research. But, none of these is quite the same as doing the hard work of teaching those K-12 students ourselves, of navigating those relational contexts in the first-person, experiencing the emotional weight of the challenge while attempting to bring to bear a pedagogy informed by both practical experience and theory.

Some may question whether the gap between university and K-12 teaching is nearly as wide as we assert. It is certain that both contexts require profound intellectual and emotional investment. But, we believe that the contexts are fundamentally different as well. In our experience straddling both worlds, we are continually reminded of the countless influences that shape what happens in the K-12 classroom: from the complexities of child and adolescent development, to curricular mandates directed by the state or the school, to the effect of standardized tests, to the relationships with parents and community, and more. Context must always matter to teachers, and our chief assertion is that when we remain vitally connected to both worlds, we can more effectively help aspiring teachers navigate and succeed in the K-12 context.

3. Fusing Concept and Practice

Our case for grounded practice has focused thus far on the need for aspiring teachers to learn from those with practical expertise and understanding of the K-12 context. But, if that were all that is necessary, one might question why university faculty should even play a central role in teacher education. Why not simply have K-12 teachers prepare aspiring teachers? Are university-based teacher educators essentially middlemen who can be cut out in the pursuit of efficiency and effectiveness? Or said differently, what is the value added by having university-based teacher education?

Teacher education has historically been divided between two strands of courses. The first focuses on imparting conceptual understandings that are the principles, frameworks, or guidelines that teachers use to guide their decisions about teaching and learning. The second strand helps students develop practical strategies and tools to teach in a particular context. Invariably, the tension experienced by students and by teachers is that "conceptual tools facilitate teachers' framing and interpretations of practice, but they do not offer specific solutions for negotiating the dilemmas that arise in interaction with students" (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald,

2009, p. 274). The challenge for teacher education involves developing approaches of working with students that fuse concept and practice.

A devoted K-12 mentor can provide an abundance of practical wisdom and tried-and-true techniques, but almost by default these insights relate to the specific context in which they work. On the other hand, a teacher educator located solely in the university setting may become detached from the interplay between the conceptual and the practical. We contend that university-based teacher educators embedded in both worlds may be best positioned to integrate these two strands.

But, helping novices fuse the conceptual and the practical can be a formidable task. In fact, few criticisms of teacher education are as pervasive and daunting as our inability to demonstrate to our students the relevance of theory to practice and, in particular, how to foster an ongoing dialectic between the two as an integral part of one's work as a teacher. Part of this shortcoming is due to typical teacher education structures.

Consider what facets of learning to be a teacher are so difficult to approximate in the preservice university classroom: an authentic context, with all its fluidity and unpredictability, an appreciation for this complexity, and an ability to interpret and respond to it with nuanced judgment. This is where fieldwork is asked to play a central role; at its best, field experiences for preservice candidates provide dynamic contexts where they can explore the complicated relationship between theory and practice. But, this seems rarely the case in reality, and it's easy to understand why. Unless preservice teachers have already begun to develop a commitment to moving between theory and practice, the immediacy of demands, especially in the student teaching context, pushes theory to the back burner (Lunenberg et al., 2007).

If theory is to inform and enhance practice, we must constantly shuttle between the two, one building on the other in light of our particular context. Our insight and our ability to weave theory and practice grows as we begin to understand our students and their needs. But this dialogic capacity needs to be developed before the pressure-cooker of student teaching begins, and it needs to be cultivated throughout the learning-to-teach experience. As Grossman et al. (2009) point out,

> Principles developed in the absence of assisted practice lack the depth required for novice teachers to enact such principles in practice. At the same time, learning to enact instructional routines in the absence of a developing sense of the principles underlying such routines reinforces a view of teaching as a set of techniques. (p. 278)

But currently, our teacher education coursework typically provides little modeling of how theory and practice can be

in an ongoing dialectic, informing and responding to one another over time in a K-12 teaching context—in part because we frequently lack the opportunity to do so in that context ourselves. By contrast, if we are continually navigating that relationship ourselves, we can dramatically close the gap between "do what I say" and "do what I do." There will always be a "rub between theory and practice" (Miller & Silvernail, 1994), but our commentary on that friction—and the importance of one's practice being regularly informed by theory—has far more credibility if we're engaged in that process ourselves.

4. Learning Side by Side

Teaching about teaching can often sway us to think about curriculum and pedagogy in ethereal ways. We become beguiled by the language of theory, and the messiness of day-to-day practice is too often minimized or ignored in our admonitions to our teacher education students. By contrast, grounded practice can provide a regular and humbling reminder that *this is hard work* and that the rub between theory and practice is not always neatly resolved. Jacqueline Hughes (2006) observes that "a return to the living laboratory of the K-12 classroom made it possible for me and my prospective teachers to identify and examine the convergence of theory and practice" (p. 112). But just as important, we would suggest, is jointly examining the ways in which our theory and practice, our goals and outcomes, diverge—in short, modeling for our teacher education students how to fail. The best teachers, Banner and Cannon (1997) remind us, are the ones who "stood before us to present the act of learning with a sort of honesty that we rarely encounter in everyday life" (p. 16). Part of this honesty, we believe, is a genuine humility about our own K-12 practice and what we do when we fail in our attempts to practice what we preach.

It is certain that as teacher educators, we are continually modeling teaching to our preservice students while in the university classroom. But, there's a certain artificiality in attempting to approximate the K-12 context while in the university classroom, whether through explicit role-playing or more subtle meta-commentary (Wideen, Mayer-Smith, & Moon, 1998; Wood & Geddis, 1999). Simply put, it's a fundamentally different context from working with adolescents or younger children, especially in a compulsory setting with many resistant learners.

Consider how it would enhance the relationship between us and our preservice students if they got to visit *our* K-12 classrooms and if they got to observe and critique *us* or even team teach with us. We'd certainly receive regular doses of humility and realism about how hard it is to be a good teacher! But, if the story ends when we fall on our faces in front of our preservice students, all we're likely to do is convince many of them that law school or finance is a far better postgraduate option. Instead, we have a wonderful

opportunity to engage in joint reflection about practice. We have the opportunity to model vulnerability and collaborative reflection and instill a similar commitment in them, before the culture of isolated teaching has a chance to take hold. We learn together how to honestly appraise our practice—not only what we did well but (even more important and probably memorable for them) the various gaps between the ideal and real of our practice, between what we preach to them during Monday night's seminar and what we do in ninth-grade world history the following morning.

5. Earning Credibility With Practitioners

In considering grounded practice, we've thus far focused on its value for our own vitality and the learning of our preservice students. But, there's another benefit worth mentioning. No matter how many years we taught in the K-12 context prior to becoming a teacher educator, we are almost invariably seen as an outsider by current practicing teachers. And yet for many of us, a big part of the job is fostering and nurturing relationships with these practitioners. When they see us doing the same kind of work they're doing—or perhaps even better, partnering with them in it—they can have much more confidence that we "get it." If we engage in dialogue about good practice, our ideas don't come across as detached, unrealistic pontifications from inside our quiet university offices—and more important, they are less likely to *be* detached and unrealistic.

It's one thing to "partner" or "serve" school districts and community organizations by consulting or presenting at in-services—potentially useful contributions, to be sure—but it's another to kneel down in the dirt alongside those teachers and work the soil with them. However sympathetic an observer we might be, the distance between our seat in the back of the classroom and the whiteboard at the front—or kneeling next to the student who just can't get it while 34 other students need attention—is immense and easy to minimize. But if we do so, we miss the opportunity to cultivate relationships with our K-12 partners grounded in common experience and genuine collaboration.

Models of Staying Connected and Implications for Policy

This article seeks to respond to the question posed by the editors of JTE: "What program or pedagogical innovations illustrate attempts to interject vitality into the field?" We are both former high school teachers and administrators amid a personal and professional experiment. Can we effectively work between the worlds of teacher education and the K-12 classroom? Between us, we have more than 25 years' experience in high school teaching. Both of us struggled mightily with the decision to enter higher education, and in the early years of our work as teacher educators, we wrestled with feeling disconnected from our former vocation of K-12 teaching.

Over the past 5 years, we have each decided to partially return to the K-12 world. Rob coteaches with an English teacher at his local high school. Sam cofounded and codirects an afterschool program for urban adolescents. Both of our commitments are voluntary. Each believes that his return to teaching youth outside of the academy has revitalized his identity as a teacher educator and enabled him to work more effectively in preparing future teachers. We also struggle with the intensity of the time commitment and with negotiating the logistical challenges. Our intent is not to hold up our own fledgling efforts as an ideal to be replicated but as an "illustration" of our own ongoing effort to renew our own practice.

Grounded practice for teacher educators could take a multitude of shapes, and we suspect that many of our colleagues have experimented with various forms as well. Ample evidence from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education's Research About Teacher Education (RATE) Project indicates that teacher educators are focusing more on linkages with schools and school-related activities (Zimpher & Sherrill, 1996). The possibilities for such grounded practice are many, but some of the most straightforward models might include the following:

- Teaching in a K-12 school: teaching or coteaching a class with a full-time K-12 educator. This could also be done in conjunction with student teachers.
- Teaching K-12 students at the university: developing a course or a program offered in the university setting (in traditional classrooms, or museums, libraries, labs, or other special locales) to K-12 students.
- Teaching in an extracurricular program: working with K-12 students in an educational context outside of formal schooling.
- Back-to-school immersion: using a sabbatical to teach full-time in a K-12 setting.
- Developing summer school or inter-term programs: These could also be cotaught by teacher educators and their students.

There is no doubt that many more models could be devised for this sort of K-12 engagement by teacher educators. The one constant of such close involvement, however, is the tremendous demands on one's time. When these commitments exist as simple additions to a typical professorial workload, they are almost impossible to sustain over the long term. If teacher education programs—and the colleges and universities that support them—are serious about restoring professional vitality and closing the gap between ivory tower and K-12 practice, they will need to reconceptualize how their faculty should spend their time.

As it stands now, it's often the low-status faculty in the university setting who are closest to the ground in terms of K-12 practice—adjunct professors, for instance, who may even continue to teach part- or full-time in the local schools. We wonder how the culture of teacher education

might change if senior faculty decided to return to the K-12 classroom—not as experts or researchers but as teachers of young people.

We realize that most teacher education programs would be reluctant to institutionalize grounded practice as a general expectation, and we doubt that such a shift would make for effective policy anyway. But, our hope is that grounded practice—in whatever forms best fit the individuals and institutions who pursue it—could be seen as a legitimate, central commitment, one that benefits not only the teacher educator but his or her students and the profession as well.

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