Social Foundations in Teacher Education: A Contemporary Snapshot

Dr. James O. Barbre III
Indiana University East
Richmond, Indiana

Abstract. Over the past several decades, changes in the nature of the teacher training and the expectations of schools have resulted in changes to the curriculum at the university level. Within the scope of pre-service training, there have historically been courses in social foundations, methods and assessment, and finally field experience. An increased emphasis on pedagogy and assessment has meant the decrease of study within the social foundations areas and an increase in the specific pedagogical courses. The aim of this study was to better understand the current status of social foundations study in teacher education programs. The results show that social foundations courses at the undergraduate level are substantially diminished and that this important sub-discipline primarily mostly lives at the graduate level now. The results of this research are discussed for the professional implications it holds for teachers and the profession of teaching.

Keywords: Social Foundations; Teacher Training, Curriculum; History; Philosophy.

Introduction

This paper will argue that as time has passed over the last half century, an important and essential component of teacher preparation has been quietly swept under the rug to the point of possibly being forgotten about. This has occurred as a result of the convergence of forces outside teaching and also within the profession itself. This 'missing piece' is that of social foundations in education. Through this analysis, it will be argued that a variety of forces have shaped education's current form in a way that modern educators being trained well in certain areas of the profession, but are missing a strong and essential framework of professional awareness and practice. Perhaps most essential is because ultimately social foundations in education addresses the ultimate purpose and values of an education, and not just its economic utility. The essential and central role of the teacher as the facilitator of this interface between students and the system of education with which they are engaged is critical, because the beliefs students gather through their college study form the

comprehensive framework through which they approach the 'essential profession' (Ryan, 2006).

The beliefs that teachers take into the transitive learning spaces of the classroom are reflected through the pedagogies used to ply the trade (Benchik-Osborne, 2013). Regardless the curriculum packages or subject matters that teachers use, the part where a student encounters the physical teacher is what sets the tone for everything that follows. The development of modern pedagogy in the pre-service sense of the word comes through the study of learning theory and is combined with greater and greater degrees of field experience time in classrooms and schools. That result of this unique blend of academic scholarship and practical hands-on time in the classroom is the modern educator. Regardless of the year in which they graduate, or the set of methods that may be in vogue at the time, this new educator is part of the larger cadre that is spread across the country and comprises the profession at any given point. Therefore, the nature for how well-rounded the teacher's preparation for this time is quite important. The researcher offers this observation say this because he was certainly there at one time and remember many of the common philosophical viewpoints and instructional approaches of the time. Teachers today are faced with a different set of circumstances and the skillsets and academic training they receive are missing the important process of being able to ask 'why' question of their teaching. 'Why are we doing this?' This is a question that must be asked again and again, so as to further refine can take place. Yet, a person should have the nature of asking questions as a pedagogy into itself.

Today, the intersecting demands placed on teachers and schools often place teachers in a role more akin to that of a learning technician. Compartmentalized school curriculums often result in teaching the same material in a repetitious fashion throughout the day (Spring 1990; 2010). This 'silo' effect reverberates throughout the school. From the perspective of efficient instruction, it could be argued that such a technician's role makes a perfect sense. Efficiency, however, has become an item of fixation in educational circles and that has drastically depleted the 'why we do this' aspect of many teacher's jobs (Berliner and Biddle, 1995).

A constant challenge for those that conceive of and plan instruction and curriculum across a broader context is to remember that there are human beings on the other side. This curriculum is compulsory and students must learn it, lest they will repeat or be retaught. Teachers must teach it and teach it well, or they may be unemployed. Neither of these two features addresses the value of what is being taught and why students should be curious about or engage it on intellectual terms. Faculties are so driven by the scheduling demands required to satisfy cycles of assessment, that the aesthetic experiences that accompany learning can be out-rightly lost or obscured. The 'why' that drives education is qualitative in nature and not as only quantitative science would report (Popham, 2001). It is important to state at the outset that the researcher does not subscribe to the efficiency-driven framework in the modern 'strict sense of the word'. Embracing a quality-driven framework that must be efficient in order to

function. This is a very important distinction to draw, but one that has often been overlooked and often misunderstood. I have come back to the nature of this dichotomy repeatedly over my career.

As a sub-discipline within education, social foundations originally evolved as a practical response to educational practices of the day. Changes across American society in the late 1800's and early 1900's were driven by many factors, chief among them is the industrial revolution. These profound social changes influenced the possibilities and strictures within the educational system. Chief among our system of formal education was the belief that it should be classical in nature (Spring, 1990; Waters, 2008). This Renaissance-driven logic and practice was maintained carefully over generations as it applied to the small group of individuals who would wield the greatest influence with their leadership. Their classical education reflected a need to maintain bodies of knowledge, instead of letting them readily evolve with a society's needs. With this, a schism of sorts developed between what the academy deemed essential and that instruction which was deemed essential to everyday life for everyday people. In essence, what counts as the accepted Lingua Franca, and what does not?

Philosophers and thinkers of the day addressed this schism differently, if they felt the need to address it at all. John Dewey (1933) became a prolific scholar whose works went farthest with their details. His criticism of a traditional classical education of the day was tempered with the recognition that schools must produce the skills inherent to the needs within the social fabric, and not just blindly replicate teachings from the classical cannon. Schools were there to produce intelligent people to feed the culture, rather than serving the sole function of simply reproducing the old culture with all its baggage. John Dewey's (1933) belief and approach to teaching and learning, known as pragmatism, has remained an important part of educational thought for almost a century and is integral with the discipline of social foundations.

Since the time of Dewey, other scholars have built on the work of pragmatism and used it as a lens to view and review the aims and results of schooling. It would not be difficult to list an impressive array of individuals whose individual and collective contributions have substantially influenced what we believe about our students and our schools (Pinar, 1995). The very nature of curriculum as a body of theory stems from this. A critically important thread that connects these bodies of scholarship involves the need for an examination of history, philosophy, and sociology as they relate to education. This thread is continuously present. It is through the introduction and study of these areas and the ways each field permeates the school that teachers better understand the long and short game of the institution it has executed its mission over time. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Social foundations does not provide the basis upon which all educational theory is originally built, but it also comprises an essential 'lens' through which one can view the ultimate value being served by the school.

There is an inextricable link between the curriculum that pre-service teachers study in order to become a teacher and the development of a broader institutional compass as it relates to teaching. One is the 'what' and the other is the 'why'. The development of this compass, or lens, as it shall be used it from this point, is essential to the long-term relationship between teachers and the institutions they serve (Brewer, 2006; Gruenewald 2003; Jones and Enriquez, 2009; McCarty and Nicholas, 2014). The important nature of this relationship is akin to the importance of doctors developing the essential ethical and moral structures that guide their practices and field of research.

In modern medical settings, an individual that goes to see a physician can reasonably expect them to be proficient with the skills they use in promoting patient health, but and perhaps more importantly that they know how to relate this information and work with the patient in the first place. Otherwise, the relationship between doctor and patient is utilitarian only and this does not do a good job in promoting health. It is too basic and unrewarding. Some refer to this relationship as having good bedside manner, or the 'ethics' of the profession, but it is an expectation that patients have, otherwise we believe ourselves to be receiving sub-standard care. Speaking from the experiential perspective as a veteran educator, one should also be able to expect that the profession maintains certain competencies. Those expectations are that the person teaching me will be a competently trained individual. I can expect that they have been instructed in how to teach and assess and that there are certain professional dispositions that are considered important and that these dispositions roughly guide the classroom practice of many teachers.

Another skill that I expect, due to my own experience in education, is the ability to analyze and evaluate the larger trends in the profession of education. This ability is crucial in that it addresses the same ethical structure of the physician, but for education. Trends in education are certainly repeated and this may be either good or bad or both. If one knows how and what to repackage, there is certainly a significant reward in purveying recycled ideas. Teachers are part of the body of professionals that should be able to wrestle with these deeper questions of philosophy and the like and so have a real say on what kinds of educational reforms are brought about by new ideas or even the repackaged ones. This cumulative contribution is part of what drives the relevance of educational programs and study forward. The ability of modern teachers to make this contribution, however, is disappearing from how pre-service teachers understand their profession to be constructed and work.

It would be difficult to state exactly when our system of education becomes so obsessed with assessment. There have been many notable events that have driven policy and influences from outside education. However, the drive behind testing and assessment can be argued to have regained its strength and momentum with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act (2001)*. With each passing cycle, the emphasis on testing and precise pedagogies for instruction was always the first and easiest to talk about or quantify (Popham, 2001).

It would be advantageous to better understand the current state of social foundations as it exists in teacher preparation programs. It is important to be able to understand the bodies of knowledge that beginning teachers come to school with about their own profession. After all, they are their own first advocate.

Methodology

For this study, the researcher developed a randomized list of twenty states from the United States. For each state, a sample of universities from each Carnegie classification rating (R-1, R-2, R-3, M-1, M-2, M-3, BAC-Diverse Fields) were developed with a maximum of four universities and colleges. The teacher preparation programs and degree plans for these universities were collected and reviewed alongside course descriptions and syllabi where possible. From this analysis, it was possible to identify how and where social foundations courses were located as a part of the respective programs relative to general education, methods and pedagogy, and field experience. A review of these programs reveals some interesting information at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Some of this is good news, but there are certainly cautionary flags to be raised about where programming is headed.

Results and Discussion

There are four primary types of teacher preparation: Early childhood, elementary, secondary, and special education, while different universities and schools combine these differently. In certain programs, a student chooses a minor as a part of their degree. While some colleges and universities offer a subject matter focus (i.e. math, reading, middle level science, etc.), other programs (i.e. Quinnipiac University) offer an integrated bachelor's/master's degree. In the area of secondary education, however, the evidence shows there to be a growing trend whereby schools and colleges of education no longer house their own secondary programs. This comes through the emphasis on content mastery often required at various state levels. In cases where secondary certification is obtained through an academic unit other than a school or college of education, the degree is often obtained through the school specializing in the discipline with an accompanying sequence of professional education courses to make up the pedagogy end of the degree. This occurs for reasons that involve both licensure and accreditation for the university.

Across all teacher education programs reviewed, public and private, there is a sustained focus on the development of specific technical skill sets as they relate to methods, instruction and assessment. This is rightly so. The reviewed programs showed a number of different features in methods and assessment focus within certain programs. These courses tend to be divided along two general trajectories: 1) subject matter and 2) age/developmental level. Through the increased emphasis on this skill set development and more targeted methods in teaching and assessment, these courses simply take up more room within the program. Neither the direct application of these skill sets, nor their importance is in question. It is important to keep a perspective as the times and institutions change.

As time goes by, every program in higher education goes through semi-regular periods of adjustment with course content and credit hour requirements. Any state legislature can require a reduction in credit hours or a new administrator can institute a program change or the changes in schools require a change at the university level. There are no real sacred cows in the curriculum. Institutions of higher education also regularly communicate with a variety of people and groups on the outside for almost every level of university operation.

Social foundations courses, as they remain in the undergraduate curriculum, are offered at the introductory level. While every university offers this introductory course, only 40% of the surveyed programs required a second course. When they did, this second course showed the overwhelming trend of being a diversity-based course. While this is an improvement, the appreciable value that this study brings to the building of a critical lens is still questionable. It is within this short 16-week course that the history, philosophy, sociology, and other 'introductory' components are covered. My argument is that this is simply not adequate.

Taking the typical introductory course, one may roughly break down how most of the content will be presented. With a 16-week semester, absent short courses, students are likely to have 1-2 textbooks to read. A review of the sort of texts that accompany courses like these will contain a variety of information, but the history and philosophy sections of this text will be brief. Perhaps, this may take students 1-2 chapters from a text that may be 8-10 chapters in length. With such an abbreviated amount of time to cover, the direction and development of the institution and practices of teaching; a student will likely have 2-3 weeks of reading and discussion for this area of scholarship. This is hardly the amount of time required for anyone wishing to become informed on any topic. At best, each student will develop a superficial understanding. Once a student covers this information, alongside educational psychology, the student is judged to be immediately ready for methods and/or field experience. This is a too compressed sequence for students to gain a firm grasp of the important and formative concepts that animate education.

Modern teacher preparation programs are heavily influenced by forces outside of education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). A variety of forces, both public and private, have shaped education over the years and have culminated with our present environment. At present, the sheer focus on assessment and evaluation of student learning, the unmentioned teacher performance observations and the link between student performance and job performance have resulted in a change in training emphases. As a result, a shift in the offered content has crossed virtually every college and university (Aundra, 2014). This shift in content was resulted from two opposing forces. The first is the inability of programs to simply add credit hours to the requirements, though most education programs modify the framework they have. The second is the programmatic prioritization caused by the first force. Addressing the kind of pedagogy and assessment training that the efficiency model is predicated on

often, and unfortunately, requires some subjects to take on a level of secondary importance. The shift in this content has lessened the social foundations content to favor the presence of a greater number of pedagogy and assessment courses.

At the graduate level, social foundations study has remained and thrived, but only in certain circles. Of the university reviewed programs, social foundations courses were present but found primarily in programs where educational leadership was the focus. Within these programs, course descriptions and course titles become quite broad and reaching. While there are a handful of social foundations graduate programs across the country, the utility of the scholarship appears to have been absorbed by the field of educational leadership. As a social foundations scholar, I see the utility of this, but I am saddened by it nonetheless. The primary reason for this lies in the fact that this kind of scholarship and discussion lives only in certain circles. From the perspective of a healthy profession and institution, I would argue that it is all our interests that everyone be as highly educated as possible. Privileging this only within certain circles and to but a few is a mistake.

A point of distinction is necessary at this time. Creating and sustaining any program of study is never an easy job and decisions and changes are made all the time. The skill sets that emerge from teachers' studies ~~with~~ are just as subject to change and re-adjustment as anything else that happens across the K-12 spectrum (Tedick, 2009; Tredway, 1999; Waters, 2008). The cautionary flag being raised here should not be construed as any sort of indictment of against faculty or programs in higher education. Indeed, the researcher serves proudly as a faculty of education. We are all here to do the work that we are all here to do. Some of us focus on reading methods while others focus on different aspects of special education. We have our own silos. The problem with the current pan-institutional framework lies in what it is leaving out and reducing the presence of. Any discipline within education requires some sort of block of study if it is to be taken with any degree of seriousness. Alan (2007) makes a compelling case for the presence and continuous development of the strong poet. One cannot advocate for or be a part of change if one does not know what change truly is.

As a younger generation of teachers, twenty years ago; myself included, we were educated and trained up to be teachers, we discussed some of the features and tenets that separated one branch of philosophy of education from another. Not that we had to be masters of all, but we were able to engage in basic levels of discussion and debate in ways that impacted the operations of our schools and the way the curriculum worked. This represented the natural application to professional settings where the results of philosophical and historical study would have their application into the profession of teaching (Conklin, 2014). Unless we were equipped to understand the changing nature of the school, we were merely agents of the whims of reformers. We knew this and realized it was necessary because of a larger discourse on education (Crook, 2002; Lowenstein, 2009; Freire, 1970).

There is no counterargument to the notion that schools and teachers must be efficient and effective in their purpose, nor should there be. Yet, we should be mindful of the ways that those converging and highly influential forces impact this essential profession (Morrier, Irving, Dandy, Dmitriyev, &Ukeje, 2007; Kerr, Mandzuk, & Raptis, 2011). I can scarcely think of a single individual who would prefer that teaching and learning be strictly a technical exchange of information. It is much more than that and the programming in higher education should be reflective of such.

Schools and colleges of education must be vigilant and ensure that social foundations remain an integrated experience with teacher education. For those of us who prepare future professionals for the field of education, we know what it would be like to try and operate without a necessary skill set. The cadre that comprises our future profession should not have to re-discover the usefulness of this scholarship and the system of value that goes with it.

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