

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**Navigating the Contested Terrain of  
Teacher Education Policy and Practice**

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**Navigating the Contested Terrain of Teacher Education  
Policy and Practice: Introduction to the Special Issue**

*Elena Aydarova*  
Auburn University



*David C. Berliner*  
Arizona State University  
United States

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**Abstract:** In the policy climate where various actors claim to have the solutions for the enduring challenges of teacher education, policy deliberations sideline certain voices. This introduction to the special issue explores policy contestations surrounding teacher education and highlights some of the perspectives overlooked by policy debates. It lays out new priorities for the teacher education community to ensure that the profession's collective voice would be heard by policy-makers and by the public at large.

**Keywords:** education policy, teacher education

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**Navegando en el terreno disputado de la política y la práctica de la formación docente: Introducción a la edición especial**

**Resumen:** En el clima político en el que varios agentes aseguran tener las soluciones para los desafíos que persisten en la formación del profesorado, las deliberaciones sobre políticas dejan atrás ciertas voces. Esta introducción al número especial explora los conflictos de políticas que rodean la educación de docentes y resalta algunas de las perspectivas que pasan por alto los debates sobre políticas. Establece nuevas prioridades para la comunidad de formación docente para garantizar que la voz colectiva de la profesión sea escuchada por los responsables políticos y por el público en general.

**Palabras-clave:** política educativa, formación docente

**Navegando no terreno disputado da política e prática da formação de professores: Introdução à edição especial**

**Resumo:** No clima político em que vários agentes afirmam ter soluções para os desafios que persistem na formação de professores, as deliberações políticas deixam certas vozes. Esta introdução à questão especial explora os conflitos políticos em torno da formação de professores e destaca algumas das perspectivas que ignoram os debates políticos. Estabelece novas prioridades para a comunidade de formação de professores para garantir que a voz coletiva da profissão seja ouvida pelos decisores políticos e pelo público em geral.

**Palavras-chave:** política educacional, formação de professores

**Navigating the Contested Terrain of Teacher Education Policy and Practice**

The last 20 years have been tumultuous for university-based teacher education in the United States (Baltodano, 2012; Bullough, 2014; Sleeter, 2008; Weiner, 2007; Zeichner, 2010) and around the world (Beauchamp et al., 2016; Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012; Ellis & McNicholl, 2015; Furlong, Cochran-Smith, & Brennan, 2013; Trippstad, Swennen, & Werler, 2017). Debates over the quality of education contributed to reframing of teacher education as a policy problem, in which changes in parameters could produce better results (Cochran-Smith, 2004). This reframing ushered in an increased focus on deregulating entry into the teaching profession, privatizing teacher preparation, as well as decreasing autonomy of university-based teacher education (Baltodano, 2012; Bullough, 2016; Zeichner & Peña-Sandoval, 2015). Teachers and teacher educators have become subject to increased surveillance, micro-management, and scapegoating for educational and societal ills that are often beyond their control, such as poverty (Zeichner, 2009) or social stratification (Kumashiro, 2015). At the same time, urgent calls for increased accountability have facilitated the proliferation of bureaucratic machines that support the heavy-handed and often punitive data-driven policy infrastructure (Allington, 2005; Anagnostopoulos, Lewis & Young, 2013; Rutledge, & Jacobsen, 2013; Wilson, 2014). Of course, struggles over teacher education are not happening in a vacuum. Public higher education overall has witnessed years of defunding and weathered multiple attacks on programs with low utilitarian value that allegedly fail to prepare their graduates for jobs.

In consideration of these challenges, we framed this special issue as an attempt to consider how educators and educational researchers navigate the contested terrain of teacher education policies and practices. Among the numerous submissions we received, a number of manuscripts focused on the challenges associated with the implementation of performance assessments for teacher licensure. These manuscripts constitute the first part of our special issue. In this

introduction, we want to situate the challenges associated with performance assessments and described in these manuscripts in the broader contestations over teacher education.

## Contestations over Teacher Education Policies and Practices

One of the responses to the attacks unleashed against teacher education as a low-quality institution (for example, Levine, 2006) has been a growing focus on the issues of design (Floden, Richmond, Drake, & Petchauer, 2017). Various groups have been exploring how to improve teacher education systems and structures so that program graduates will be prepared for the task of teaching on day one. For instance, focusing on practice, TeachingWorks headed by Deborah Ball at the University of Michigan championed the work on high-leverage practices, whereas Core Practices Consortium has promoted the work on the core practices of teaching. Texas Tech launched U.S.PREP – a coalition of universities seeking to transform teacher preparation through university-school partnerships, structured management of teacher candidates' clinical practice, along with a strong focus on data collection. In this context, performance assessments developed by the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity (SCALE) align with the other transformations in the field that seek to redesign teacher education based on more clearly articulated constructions of teaching and learning.

Yet the focus on design alone does little to address educational reformers' successes in challenging university-based teacher education and framing it as irrelevant. When reformers, economists, and conservative think-tanks refer to teacher education as "low quality," their goal is not just to improve quality but rather to promote low-cost alternatives. The struggle over teacher education is not only a matter of human capital (how to improve the quality of those who enter) but also a matter of resources (how to decrease financial and time investments but receive the same returns). Consider, for example, how economists' research comparing the achievement of students taught by different groups of teachers concludes that there is "little difference in the average academic achievement impacts of certified, uncertified and alternatively certified teachers" (Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2008, p. 629; also see Diaz, 2014). If students of the teachers who did not go through four or six years of teacher preparation do as well as or not as bad as the other students, then it is not clear that teacher education is worth the investment it currently requires. A recent report from Bellwether Education Foundation expresses the same sentiment in more direct terms:

Every year, new teachers collectively spend about \$4.8 billion on their training requirements, nearly all of which goes to teacher preparation programs. Unfortunately, it's unclear whether that is money well spent. (Mitchell & King, 2016, p. 2)

Hardly any design change in university-based teacher education can make it a cheap pathway into the profession. This underlying assumption facilitates the proliferation of alternative routes into teaching.

Reformers' attempts to bypass university-based teacher education and introduce shortened versions of job training for teachers have now been enshrined in federal legislation, despite growing evidence about the ineffectiveness of independent teacher education programs (Zeichner, 2016). The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), for instance, equates the preparation of highly qualified teachers with a total bypassing of university-based teacher education. Teacher and principal preparation academies advocated by ESSA are not supposed to be burdened by "unnecessary restrictions" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 150) of having faculty with advanced degrees or engaged in research, of having basic expectations of infrastructure, or meeting

any credit hour or accreditation requirements. The problem is that teachers who are expected to take such fast tracks into the profession are supposed to teach in hard-to-staff schools, which could magnify existing inequities. Even though the provisions stipulate that teachers have to raise student achievement in order to receive a certificate from the academy, it is unlikely that in a highly segregated society where students' achievement is often correlated with their race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, a teacher with abridged preparation will undo the effects of massive social, political, and economic inequities. Ultimately, it is ironic to see the pursuit of quality take the path of decreased standards, lowered expectations, and eliminated provisions.

The introduction of performance assessments was meant to accomplish the opposite – to increase standards and raise expectations about teachers' effectiveness (Darling-Hammond & Lieberman, 2012). While this change was applauded by some in the reformers' circles, others responded to them as an unjustifiable squandering of resources (yet again). Kate Walsh of the National Council for Teacher Quality in her blog post on edTPA commenting on Goldhaber's findings that edTPA results are predictive of teacher effectiveness in reading but not in math, raised the question:

Given that the edTPA is a lot of work for programs and is costly to boot, is this enough bang for the buck? After all, instructions for candidates entail 40 pages and candidates are alerted that they can be evaluated on the edTPA on nearly 700 different items. The process consumes the attention of teacher candidates and teacher educators in their programs for a good share of candidates' semester-long student teaching placement. (Walsh, 2016)

A conservative education news group, *The 74 Million*, publicized a report produced by Bellwether Education Partners as a well-reasoned argument for relaxing entry requirements but making it harder for teachers to stay in the profession if they cannot improve students' achievement<sup>1</sup>. The authors of this report pointed out that a lack of external research supporting the use of edTPA suggests that increasing barriers for entry into the profession is not the way to improve the quality of teaching (Aldeman & Mitchel, 2016).

Reformers' claims about a lack of research evidence to support teacher education practices, policies, or innovations are not new. In fact, contributors to this special issue raise similar concerns about the lack of research conducted by scholars outside of SCALE's sphere of influence on the effectiveness and usefulness of performance assessments. Yet responding to critics would require the kind of research that would be difficult, if not impossible, to carry out without substantial external funding. Opportunities for large-scale funded research, however, tend to decline (Sleeter, 2014). Instead, most support is directed towards a limited number of research areas. Most recently, the Department of Education has set aside funding to support the development of teacher academies (see above), confining most funding for teacher education research to STEM fields, special education, or English language learners. For example, the Education Secretary's proposed priorities for Department of Education competitive grant programs released in 2017 for public discussion mentions teacher preparation only once: "Increasing the opportunities for high-quality preparation of, or professional development for, teachers or other educators of science, technology, engineering, and math subjects" (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, p. 47490). Such a narrow funding focus increases the risk that important questions raised by the critics of teacher education will remain largely unanswered due to a lack of support from federal funding.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.the74million.org/article/a-radically-sensible-proposal-for-training-teachers-make-it-easier-to-enter-harder-to-stay/>

Philanthropic foundations often step up to the plate and offer financial support for research in teacher education. Their funding, however, tends to support projects that align with the ideologies they promote, and generate evidence for the market-based policies they support (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Scott & Jabbar, 2014; Zeichner & Conklin, 2016). In particular, philanthropic funding has been instrumental in advancing privatization and technocratization of teacher education. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, for example, has provided funding not only for TeachingWorks run by University of Michigan and U.S.Prepare run by Texas Tech, but also for Relay Graduate School of Education, National Center for Teacher Residencies, Inc<sup>2</sup> as well as Elevate Preparation, Impact Children (EPIC), led by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The latter awardees represent a move towards a greater involvement of private actors in teacher preparation, whereas the 'Transformation Centers' overall focus on improving teacher preparation through data use, clinical practice, and measurable replicable practices captures a technocratic approach to teaching.

Reformers' successes in advancing their agendas are due in part to their ability to organize and mobilize resources in support of fairly standard talking points. Non-profit or private sector actors focus on network-building, coalition development, and targeting policy-makers with easily accessible messages. Consider, for example, the Hunt Institute – a non-profit organization in North Carolina – one among many actors engaged in disseminating policy proposals for teacher education reforms. The Institute's vision is to influence policy and it does so by "conven[ing] governors, policymakers, and legislators, as well as business, education, and civic leaders across the nation to provide them with the best information to make informed policy decisions" (Hunt Institute, 2014). That vision becomes enacted through legislators' retreats and governors' symposia that the Institute organizes. Unlike typical academic conferences, such events allow policy ideas to reach policymakers directly – the very audience that has the power to enact and implement them. The Hunt Institute's initiative to provide 30-minute webcasts during lunch hours speaks to their readiness to deliver messages in ways that accommodate their audience's busy schedules.

In the context of these broader contestations, the teacher education community needs to consider a new set of priorities. To the matters of design it has to add the matters of public policy engagement to demonstrate its relevance to broader communities than just the readers of highly specialized journals. In other words, a pursuit of better models needs to be accompanied by activities that can help the teacher education community to reclaim a collective voice over the directions of change and its future. Reclaiming this voice requires building coalitions both within the field of teacher education and beyond it. Within the field itself, it is important to create spaces for dialogue about professional, moral, ethical, and democratic goals of teacher preparation. As it has been observed before, the field lacks a shared vision and a shared language about the teaching profession (Grossman & McDonald, 2008). To generate those, it is paramount for teacher educators to engage substantively with each other about the problems that plague the field and about the criticisms leveled against it. These dialogues, however, cannot be conducted *pro forma*. For example, AACTE claims that edTPA emerged out of consultations with teachers and teacher educators, yet contributors to this volume (along with others in the field – see Au, 2013; Dover & Schultz, 2016; Greenblatt & O'Hara, 2015; Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016) report on the marginalization and silencing that they experienced.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://nctresidencies.org/>

## **Performance Assessments: Marginalized Voices and Underrepresented Perspectives**

Nick Henning, Alison Dover, Erica Dotson, and Ruchi Agarwal-Rangath (this volume) describe their struggles with teacher performance assessments and ways in which their critiques were silenced or sidelined. Using the methodological tools of counternarratives to document and critique the impact of teacher performance assessments on their work as teacher educators, they show how at the department, institution, and even professional organization levels, they were treated as “trouble-makers” and “cranks” because of their critical appraisal of performance assessments. In the context of widespread standardization of teacher education curriculum driven by external assessments and constant critiques of the field, performance assessments constrained the authors’ work, restricted the curriculum they had to teach, and limited the depth of their students’ engagement with the issues of diversity and social justice. Their responses to the imposition of performance assessments varied from covert subversion to overt resistance. It is for these acts of insubordination and disobedience that they became penalized.

Christine Clayton (this volume), on the other hand, attends to the voices of student teachers over three semesters of edTPA implementation at her institution. Surveys and interviews with student teachers revealed that they saw misalignment between the feedback they received in their prior courses and on edTPA. Because student teachers felt unsupported by school mentors who were not familiar with the assessment and had to focus on what the assessment required rather than what their students needed to learn, they came to see their work on edTPA as a subtractive experience. As such, it reduced student teachers’ learning instead of supporting it to strengthen the profession.

Supplementing students’ perspectives with their own reflections, Martha Donovan and Susan Cannon (this volume) examine how they experienced edTPA as a dilemma that overshadowed the student teaching experiences of the teacher candidates they worked with. They address how their supervision of student teaching experience became transactional because of student teachers’ constant worry about edTPA results. According to Donovan and Cannon’s observations, student teachers’ focus on edTPA requirements, along with its price and failure rate, has turned teacher candidates into customers engaged in an economic transaction rather than professionals ready to embark on a long-term commitment to the ethical and democratic commitments of education.

Finally, Stephanie Cross, Alyssa Dunn, and Erica Dotson (this volume) position their concerns about edTPA in the broader context of neoliberal transformations in teacher education. Framing those transformations as the “hydra of teacher education,” the authors record their experiences of hopelessness, silence, and acquiescence to the institutional policies that go counter their ethical commitments as social justice educators. The methodological tools of poetic inquiry afford the authors an opportunity to take an innovative approach to policy analysis and to chart pathways for collective resistance. As the authors describe the acts of resistance that they engaged in, such as a teach-in on the ban of ethnic studies in Arizona, they note the challenges and risks they faced. The backlash they experienced sent them back to the place of hopelessness and fear. While they seek to reclaim their positions as scholar activists, they also contemplate how challenging it is to struggle with the hydra whose heads grow back after they are cut off.

To facilitate scholarly dialogue on the issues raised by these manuscripts, we invited the team from the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity to comment on the manuscripts included in this issue. We also encouraged the authors to respond back. The thoughtfulness of this dialogue and the diversity of perspectives it captures are a sign of health for a field in which it is hard to define what experiences make for a quality teacher education program or what practices can ensure equitable outcomes for students. The fact that quality and equity can be achieved in so many

different ways creates situations in which what looks to be disarray or poor choices by one scholar, is really thoughtfulness about the profession from another vantage point. Yet to ensure teacher education's continued future, we hope that scholarly interactions that demonstrate ability to hear across difference and to negotiate the establishment of common ground will become much more common.

## Moving Forward

Dialogues within the field are important as stepping stones towards building collectives that work to disrupt the dismantling of teacher education and public schooling. This work is underway in many corners of the US. For example, Tuck and Gorlewski (2016) described the work of a collective of teacher educators in New York that combined efforts to counter the hegemonic logic of edTPA that they saw as a colonizing force. The Teacher Education Collective that brought together scholars from across the country published a sobering critique of Betsy DeVos's candidacy for the Education Secretary in a regional newspaper.<sup>3</sup> A group of junior scholars who comprise the Teacher Education Thought Collective responded to the new funding priorities by challenging its market-based logic. Another notable group active in opposing neoliberal education reforms is Deans for Justice and Equity. Their *Declaration of Principles on Public Education, Democracy, and the Role of Federal Government* issued in January 2017 demonstrates their commitments to the struggle against the dismantling of public education at large. Moving beyond the individualizing structures of academia, these various groups have undertaken the task of public intellectuals who "offer critique of policies and practices that are problematic in terms of logic and evidence or that will not serve the best interests of schoolchildren, families, and teachers" (Cochran-Smith, 2006, p. 203).

Finally, it is important to reach beyond the field of teacher education to build alliances, networks, and coalitions that will strive towards a greater public good. These alliances can support underserved communities who seek just and equitable education for their children (Sleeter, 2008), reach out to policy-makers, or join activist groups in defending the rights of marginalized populations (Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006). Coalitions and alliances with social movements, policy communities, and grass-roots organizations could mobilize resources and generate long-lasting cultural changes that are necessary to address the inequities that exist in U.S. public education (Oakes & Lipton, 2002), to prevent deprofessionalization of teaching, and to preclude elimination of university-based teacher education. Echoing Bourdieu's (2000) call for scholars to use their intellectual and social capital to support social movements that fight against the degradation and disruption of human life caused by neoliberalism, we encourage our readers to consider the struggles around them as opportunities to engage in a fight for a better future. Given all the contestations surrounding public education and teacher education in particular, now is not the time to remain silent.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/2017/01/27/betsy-devos-unqualified-lead-education-department/97135790/>

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### About the Authors/Guest Editors

#### **Elena Aydarova**

Auburn University

[eza0029@auburn.edu](mailto:eza0029@auburn.edu)

Website: <https://elenaaydarova.com>

Elena Aydarova is Assistant Professor of Social Foundations at the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology at Auburn University. Her interdisciplinary research examines the interactions between global social change and the work of teachers, teaching, and teacher education through the lens of equity and social justice. Her projects have explored teacher education reforms in Russia and the US, internationalization of education, teacher retention, as well as privatization of teacher preparation. She has recently completed a book manuscript "Teacher Education Reforms as Political Theater: Policy Dramas in Neoliberal Contexts." Throughout her career, Dr. Aydarova has taught in the United States, Ukraine, China, and the United Arab Emirates.

#### **David C. Berliner**

Arizona State University

[berliner@asu.edu](mailto:berliner@asu.edu)

David C. Berliner is Regents' Professor Emeritus of Education at Arizona State University. Dr. Berliner is a member of the National Academy of Education (NEA), the International Education Academy (IEA), a Fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and a past president of both the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the Division of Educational Psychology of the American Psychological Association (APA). He is the recipient of awards for distinguished contributions from APA, AERA, and the National Education Association (NEA). Dr. Berliner is co-author (with B. J. Biddle) of the best seller *The Manufactured Crisis*, co-author (with Ursula Casanova) of *Putting Research to Work*, co-author (with Gene Glass) of *50 Myths and Lies that Threaten America's Public Schools*, and co-author (with N. L. Gage) of six editions of the textbook *Educational Psychology*. He is co-editor of the first *Handbook of Educational Psychology* and the books *Talks to Teachers*, and *Perspectives on Instructional Time*. Professor Berliner has also authored more than 200 published articles, technical reports, and book chapters. He has taught at the University of Arizona, University of Massachusetts, Teachers College and Stanford University, as well as universities in Australia, Canada, The Netherlands, Spain, and Switzerland.

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