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Honoring and Maintaining a Dual Identity

Abstract

My father taught at a church-affiliated college as a professor of philosophy. My mother, for much of my growing-up years, was a fifth-grade public school teacher. Although I was shaped by both of these models, and attracted to each, I initially came down on the side of elementary teaching. For close to 10 years I worked, mostly happily, with upper-elementary children in both public and private settings. Professionally, at least, I seemed to have much more to talk about with my mother.

Having subsequently completed a doctorate in the history of education (including much formal and informal study of philosophy) and having taught now for 15 years at a small Christian liberal arts college, friends often point out how much my life resembles that of my father.

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In fact, I like to think of my professional journey the past thirty-some years as an on-going attempt to integrate and reconcile these two formative influences, and two aspects of my own personality, most fruitfully. A professional journey that allows me to claim the elementary teacher inside me as part of my current work as a professor—not simply discarding an identity I have left behind.

Such integration or reconciliation, to the extent that I have achieved it at all, has not been easy or the result of any sort of natural unfolding. It has been and is, an ongoing, intentional journey—and one for which I have encountered surprisingly few direct or compelling models.

Admittedly, if somewhat parenthetically now, the actual instructional component of my current work is much more similar to those early days of elementary teaching than I might have imagined. Friends and family tend to overestimate the difference in attention span between fifth-graders and even the most self-motivated candidates for teaching. College students,

no less than their elementary counterparts, appreciate a balance between routine and variety of activities, frequent opportunities for interaction, and a focus on immediate application of new ideas to what seems most developmentally and personally relevant.

That, however, is only the teaching component. Overall, the experience of most professional teacher-educators is vastly different from the day-to-day life of most K-12 teachers. Teachers and professors participate in very different professional cultures and are rewarded and affirmed for markedly different behaviors.

At this point some members of the professorial class may reveal their true colors by asking for footnotes or other such tribute to the APA god. Evidence for this particular cultural divide, fortunately, is well established in scholarly literature. Check out Laura and Jim and what they taught me about the gap between educational theory and practice (Kagan, 1993) for one of the more accessible analyses.

Most of us in higher education do not need scholarly citations, however, to tell us this simple lived truth. Beginning in graduate school, we have probably felt pressure to think, to speak, and to write in a new and different way. In many cases, to employ a more abstract, more arcane language. To value the theoretical more than lived, concrete experience: to forsake playground-duty, parent conferences, penmanship and positive reinforcement, and embrace, rather, “paradigms,” “the politics of knowledge,” and “critical pedagogy.” In short, to distance ourselves as much as possible, consciously or unconsciously, from the world of “practitioners.”

For many K-12 teachers who enter the world of higher education the transition does not merely mean acquiring a new identity. The substitution of one identity for another is seen as a step up, an unambiguous promotion in terms of worldly prestige. For some of my col-

leagues at other institutions, then, the default defense that I have heard is not, “I have some credibility about K-12 education—I am, after all, still a teacher.” Rather, the implicit and more insistent message seems to be, “I have some credibility because I am not, or no longer, just a teacher. I’m a professor with one or more advanced degrees.”

For any of us who might be tempted to shed our identities as K-12 teachers and bask in our new status, the transition can be a cruelly ironic step up. Relative to many academic departments or divisions on campus, the School of Education may suffer from a lack of prestige. The particular knowledge and skills we seek to impart are not always easily conceptualized or understood by members of other academic departments. We are accused on the one hand, of not being practical and grounded enough in the real world. On the other, colleagues question whether the field of education is sufficiently scholarly as to merit a place on campus in the first place.

In any case, from the beginning of my own transition into higher education, I was determined to wear my newly acquired academic robes with some degree of detachment. Anxious not to seem so out-of-touch as the professors I studied under in my own elementary credentialing program in the 1980s, I had vowed from Day One in graduate school to maintain my identity as a teacher. As with seminary professors who continued to serve as pastors (or made at least occasional time to preach to congregations); or medical school faculty who added to, rather than surrendered, their role as physicians, I saw no reason to give up my original professional identity.

Twenty years now from earning a Ph.D. and simultaneously beginning a full-time position in higher education, I still believe I have been most effective when I have remembered that I am, in fact, no less an elementary teacher than ever. Remembered, and actively embraced, and sought to develop that identity further. More specifically, I have tried on some level in each course, each day, and even when thinking more abstractly about my professional identity, to commit (among other ideals) to the following:

(a) Consistently to prioritize teaching over other aspects of the job. Skilled and committed teaching may be considered optional in some departments, secondary to scholarship. In an education depart-

ment the modeling of teaching is, in part, our scholarship—no less than musical performance is one manifestation of professional excellence in music; or the active production of artwork may be an expectation in a department of the visual arts. If I have to choose where to devote scarce resources—and above all the resource of time—I will almost invariably come down on the side of investing in the classroom over other aspects of my position. In keeping with my own understanding of excellent teaching, and again—in the interest of modeling for future teachers—I have always chosen to prioritize individual relationships over activities that might result in more public and more tangible rewards.

(b) To set up methods courses (at the very least, and other courses when feasible) as much like an elementary classroom as possible. To teach whenever possible in my elementary-teacher persona, using objects, pictures, and informal dramatics. I was both dismayed and delighted when my most critical, but not necessarily most discerning, student the first year at my present institution wrote on the course evaluation with definite disdain: “He treats us like fifth-graders or something!” I try to embrace not only my identity as a teacher, but my identity as an elementary teacher—which necessarily compels me to be, even in my professorial persona, a generalist. When those at other institutions marvel (perhaps secretly mock my presumption?) that I attempt to teach social studies, science, and children’s literature, among other courses, and to stay current in each, I can only point out that we expect a twenty-two-year-old elementary teacher to be such a generalist. How can we then argue that it is too difficult a role for us, in some cases with many more years of practice? As much as possible, I try to speak in class like an elementary teacher, avoiding educational jargon of any sort. I may act like a “practitioner,” but I refuse to use any such distancing terms in my lectures.

(c) To stay current and connected with the contemporary elementary classroom and elementary teachers today—not the classrooms and teachers I remember from the 1980s. Within a department as small as my own, I have the privilege of participating in field supervision each year, providing greater opportunity to maintain close relationships with elementary (and secondary) teachers. I take advan-

tage of every opportunity I have to serve as a guest speaker, formally and informally, in elementary classrooms, the better to get to know children today. I remind myself regularly that I have as much to learn from current teachers as vice-versa. Likewise, in my interactions with the numerous alumni with whom our department maintains contact. Through my own children and their friends, through random and serendipitous conversations, and even through reading contemporary children's books, I try to stay fluent in the language and maintain familiarity with the cultural icons of the moment.

(d) To free myself from any constricting image of what I, or others, think a professor in higher education "ought" to act like. If I wish to sit on the floor and imitate the behavior of a first-grader with whom I've recently interacted, I do so. Whatever colleagues in other departments may do or not do, I am no less free than before to dress as Daniel Boone or Pa Ingalls, going to and from class visible to all and without regard to any hypothetical loss of professorial dignity. At the risk of perpetuating the worst stereotypes about elementary education, I regularly choose to fold paper into flip-books or trioramas; to melt beeswax in my hands and form it into various shapes in nature; to make acorn bread in class in the same manner as did the Chumash people who walked the campus before us.

That is a start, at least, on what it means for me to cling to my identity as an elementary teacher and to manifest that identity publicly within my current role. And when first conceptualizing this essay, I was prepared to end here. That is, to focus exclusively on my deliberate rejection of the model I saw in many of my graduate school professors—always raising questions about this presumed need to substitute one identity for another. But that would be only half the story.

In order to be true to myself, and to be most effective with my students, I have also chosen to reject another common, if less dominant, model I have observed among teacher educators. This is the professor who, having earned an advanced degree to participate in higher education, embraces the new playing field, but actively distances him or herself from teacher education as a scholarly enterprise with its own questions and frames of reference. "A bunch of baloney," "all that ethereal stuff they make you spit back in gradu-

ate school," and "all that malarkey" are a few of the dismissive phrases I have heard. "In the end," I have heard professors of education declare, "a beginning teacher can only learn by 'actual teaching.'" Field experience and the coaching received there from classroom veterans, not the on-campus coursework, is the really important component in a credential program. And of course this perspective is not limited to jaded professors of education—I continue to hear it from experienced K-12 teachers in the field.

In contrast, I believe I—and most of my colleagues in the field—have far more to offer beginning and experienced K-12 teachers because of our experience in graduate school. I have never planned a class, maybe never had a conversation with an individual, in which I have not consciously or unconsciously drawn from the range of voices, historical and contemporary, that I encountered primarily or for the first time in my doctoral program. My classroom experience and inner elementary teacher identity has much to contribute to newcomers to the field, but these are not the only, or necessarily even the most valuable, things I have to offer.

Having focused on the history and philosophy of education, my examples are necessarily drawn from those sub-fields, but the point extends to colleagues in literacy, special education, and so forth. Relative to when I first taught fifth grade, and relative to most of the candidates for teaching I work with on a daily basis, I have the following to offer:

(a) My historical perspective makes me less inclined to jump onto any particular bandwagon as the panacea for all educational ills. Whether it is the stamp of Common Core on language arts and math instruction, or "inquiry-based teaching" in science, I am prone to remind teacher candidates of the long history of educational reforms that have failed to live up to their initial promise. That it is the tendency of educational reforms—as with reform in any other sphere—to have unintended consequences. To remind teacher candidates that there is as much or more continuity as change in teachers' daily practice. That what is touted as "cutting edge" today will soon be replaced by something else even edgier. My historical perspective helps me prepare candidates mentally and emotionally for the long haul, and not to oversell the pedagogical and curriculum fashions

of the moment.

(b) The historical and philosophical perspective I acquired in graduate schools helps me assist candidates in recognizing the ecological complexity of educational questions and issues. In even the most promising of teacher candidates, I often detect a narrow, simplistic, or even egocentric perspective on teaching. The mental picture many of them bring to teaching, one which they physically sketch out in a first-day exercise in one of my courses, is often limited to a group of children or adolescents and the candidate him- or herself. It is a perspective not altogether different than that of my own twenty-two-year-old self as I entered the elementary classroom. Whether merit pay for teachers or the culture of standardized testing; the sometimes different priorities of parents or administrators or school board members; or the role of state and federal government: my historical training has equipped me to deepen candidates' awareness of the multiple voices and factors that impinge on any particular educational dilemma.

(c) While distancing myself from the notion of critical pedagogy so often invoked in my graduate training, I do attempt, in the best liberal arts tradition, to help candidates apply critical thinking skills to all matters of teaching. To model a habit of considering the foundational presuppositions about human nature which have informed (say) a particular approach to classroom management, or to raise their awareness of the prevailing cultural relativism in so many curriculum materials. While not inattentive to these kinds of issues in my own elementary teaching, I am far better equipped to address these for having experienced a rigorous (if by no means value- or philosophically neutral) graduate education.

(d) As a result of all the above, and as a result of intentionally exposing candidates to as wide a range as possible of individual teacher models, famous and otherwise, I believe I help to offer candidates leaving our program at least some infinitesimal degree of greater professional freedom. I continually emphasize, and at least partly as a result of my graduate training, the teacher as a choice-maker. Ultimately, any historical or philosophical content or perspective is offered in the interests of helping candidates

to define their own professional identity.

There is clearly no one-size-fits-all model for teacher educators. In the exit interviews that our own program conducts, we hear continually that candidates appreciate how differently their major professors taught, and how divergent were their values and approaches.

Accordingly, in exploring my own quest to maintain a dual identity, I do not presume to argue that this is necessarily the best or only pattern for others. We need in teacher education the voices of analytical detachment—the perspective of the focused scholars, those who've gone deep into the challenges of educational leadership, educational technology, or working with English learners. Likewise, we may also need to continue to make room for the skeptics of teacher education as a scholarly enterprise, those who emphasize clinical practice and the nitty-gritty of well-worn wisdom from the field.

Early in my professorial life working in the University of Maine system, a candidate for elementary teaching gave me a curious back-handed compliment. After observing a model history lesson for children, Elizabeth expressed her approval—with an unflattering degree of surprise—and added words to the effect of, well, Dr. Mullen, you're good enough that you could have remained an elementary teacher. You didn't have to start a second career.

I do not recall just how I responded at the time, and over the intervening years I've lost touch. But if I were speaking to Elizabeth today, I think I would offer her this essay, suggesting that I've never had a second career, at least in the sense she may have been thinking. In my efforts to maintain and honor a dual identity, I have achieved some degree of professional unity in my life, and in Elizabeth's words, "remained an elementary teacher." In some mysterious parallel sense, working in the opposite direction, perhaps I've extended to my previous work as an elementary teacher as well the historian and philosopher of education that I have become.

References

Kagan, D. M. (1993). *Laura and Jim and what they taught me about the gap between educational theory and practice*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.