

Stranger Than Fiction: Arthur Levine's
Educating School Teachers—The Basis for a Proposal

Jennie Whitcomb, Hilda Borko, and Dan Listonⁱ

University of Colorado at Boulder

Introduction

While reading *Educating School Teachers* one of us had the odd and distinct feeling that s/he was “hearing” Emma Thompson’s voice—the novelist and “narrator” in the recent comedic film *Stranger Than Fiction*

Thompson's narrative of Harold Crick's life, and all the while thinking about the dismal state of and dire need for quality teacher education. What could be stranger than fiction? Nonfiction, especially when the nonfiction appears to be a narration of our ongoing professional lives.

Some might balk at the framing and parallels drawn here. Surely we need to approach this matter with due professional attention and diligence. Allusions to a comedic film starring the likes of naïf Will Ferrell will not further the professional stature of teacher education. We disagree. The parallels and our further elaborations will, we think, provide a helpful framing for Levine's study. At the core of Zach Helm's and Marc Forster's (writer and director respectively) film are issues of meaning and control in our personal and professional lives. As we move through our lives, we are sometimes forced to examine our motivations and goals. Conflicts and contradictions abound in these narratives, sometimes resulting in resolutions, and at other times being left unresolved. At the heart of Levine's study are painful, nonfictional contradictions that confound the practice within, research on, and policy about teacher education. Levine, following numerous past critiques of teacher education, offers an analysis that looks back at the past, depicts the present, and poses serious questions about the future of teacher education.

Teacher educators purportedly can't decide whether they are preparing teachers for a craft or a profession; whether theory is more important than clinical practice; whether teacher educators should be university scholars or skilled practitioners. For those of us who have lived lives committed to the profession of teaching and teacher education, the conflicts that Levine underscores are felt with a degree of pain and met with a

measure of humored discomfort. Humor can help make these reflections less stinging, more accepting, and possibly transformative. Without humor the contrasts between the facts of our lives and our idealized fictions cut painfully close to the core of our preferred narrative renditions. Levine, in his own quite public and academic way, asks us to examine our professional assumptions and practices. And the narrator, in this case Levine, is not without his own conflicted stances; none of us is. We'll point some of those out. But first we outline the narrative structure of *Stranger Than Fiction*, summarize Levine's framework and analyses, and then playfully, purposefully, and pointedly draw parallels between the two.

Crick's Stranger Than Fiction

The basic storyline is as follows. Harold Crick (played by Will Ferrell) is an IRS auditor known for his mathematical acumen and skilled bureaucratic processing. He measures his life as he audits accounts of others' financial lives: He counts the numbers of strokes when brushing his teeth, tallies his steps to the bus, and is, in short, the epitome of social and economic efficiency. One day, while brushing his teeth, he hears "the voice" retelling his actions and thoughts, commenting in the third-person omniscient. While this new development is disconcerting to Harold, it is when the voice foretells his death ("Little did he know that he would soon die") that Harold Crick begins to examine in earnest the meaning behind this voice, this ongoing narrative account of his everyday movements. With a sense of urgency, he visits two psychologists—one an alternative, psychobabble-inclined, hugging type of guy and the other a psychoanalytically informed, pharmacologically oriented analyst. The first one tells him to take some down time, while the other pronounces him schizophrenic and in need of drug therapy.

linkages among teacher preparation programs, teachers, and public school students' academic growth; and a series of site visits at 28 different teacher preparation programs. While the research basis for his report is not without flaws, our central focus is on the document's rhetorical and reflective power.

Levine argues that we currently find ourselves in need of many more high-quality teachers without a solid ability to deliver. In a beginning paragraph that sounds vaguely reminiscent of the 1983 report *A Nation At Risk* he writes:

More than ever before, it is imperative to have high-quality teachers. In today's information economy, education has become

with a sense of urgency, now seem *de rigueur* for national educational studies, they do

6

There is a schism over the how's and when's of teacher education between those who believe teaching is a profession like law or medicine, requiring a substantial amount of education before an individual can become a practitioner, and those who think teaching is a craft like journalism, which is learned principally on the job. (p. 13)

And he observes:

On one hand, reflecting the position that teaching is a profession, states have created a more regulated and regimented environment that strives to improve teacher quality, demands higher standards of the people entering the teaching profession, and seeks greater accountability from teachers and the institutions that prepare them. . . . On the other hand, the belief that teaching is a craft, compounded by pressure to find enough teachers to fill empty classrooms, has resulted in many states' deregulating entry requirements for teachers, creating a more open marketplace for teacher education. (p. 14)

Whether candidates travel the professional or the craft path, they face a dizzying variety of options and choices. Unfortunately, the profession has offered neither a practical and sensible direction nor a central and guiding conceptual vision. We are a profession confused about what to profess. This confusion results in basic inadequacy. Teacher preparation programs are not producing capable graduates. Levine grounds these assertions in survey responses from alumni, principals, teacher education faculty, and education deans. Of all four groups surveyed, principals were most critical of new teachers' preparation in eleven core competencies addressed. As Levine reports, "Across the 11 competencies, only 40 percent on average thought schools of education were doing

moderately well” (p. 31). Survey respondents felt schools of education were more effective in preparing teachers who have mastery of their subject matter, understand learners, and utilize different pedagogical approaches. Teachers were least prepared to address the needs of students with limited English proficiency or from diverse cultural backgrounds and to work with parents. This finding reflects recent demographic shifts in the school population that our public educational system is attempting to address. Levine thus asserts:

The inescapable conclusion is that the nation’s teacher education programs are not adequately preparing their students in competencies that principals say they need and that schools of education regard as their responsibility to teach. (p. 33)

Some Sources of the Confusion and Disarray

According to Levine, the fundamental source of this confusion lies in the historical roots of teacher preparation. Levine argues that our divided roots in normal schools and universities and our “quest to gain acceptance into the academy” (p. 23) have created the institutional conditions for curricular incoherence, disconnected faculty, and low admissions standards. State and national accreditation systems lack sufficient gumption to close low-quality

of the split between academic and clinical instruction, with an overemphasis on the academic” (pp. 43-44). Comparing education to law and medicine, Levine contends that we lack a “basic agreement on what an entry-level practitioner should know and be able to do” (p. 36). He also laments there is “no common first professional degree” (p. 36), nor are schools of education adequately involved in supporting graduates during their induction years. Levine may be whitewashing the degree of agreement within medical

but are embraced by none and their research is ignored or criticized by each. The lack of rigorous self-assessment of the nation's teacher education programs exacerbates those conditions. (p. 53)

These critiques capture a reality that many of us experience daily and the voice doesn't stop.

Admissions standards are much too low. Drawing upon a study by the Educational Testing Service and the American College Testing Program, Levine explains, "When SAT scores are disaggregated, future secondary school teachers are found to be on par with their peers, while elementary education students score considerably lower" (p. 56). The ongoing tension between quantity and quality arises because many parent institutions depend on teacher education revenues to support more prestigious programs, and teacher educators are often strongly committed to provide access to the profession. Such financial and ethical priorities mitigate efforts to have more selective admissions criteria.

Finally, Levine asserts the profession lacks sufficient quality control. Levine proclaims that in both state program approval and national accreditation, "process trumps outcomes" (p. 61). Program reviews do not pay sufficient attention to student learning outcomes and follow policies and standards set by the average or weaker institutions. Thus, according to Levine, weak programs are accredited, maintaining great disparities in institutional quality.

For Levine, the weakest group of universities, Masters level I institutions, produce 54% of our teachers. He maintains that they are "weaker academically than the other two major producers of teachers. As a group, they have lower admission standards, professors

with lesser credentials, and produce less effective graduates in the classroom” (p. 71). Levine bases his claim of reduced effectiveness on data from the NWEA study, which examined relationships between student achievement and the type of university and accreditation status of the school of education the teacher attended. “Controlling for experience, the study found that students with teachers prepared at Masters I universities show lower growth in math and reading than do students with teachers prepared at doctoral universities” (p. 77). The clear implication from Levine’s perspective is that those programs have to go—time for their demise.

At this point the voice is becoming unrelenting and almost unbearable; unbearable in its repetition of past assessments, in the seeming accuracy of much of what it says, and in its overall dismal assessment of the state of our profession. Certainly we could challenge the basis for some of Levine’s claims and the manner in which he casts them. For example, Levine’s methods of data analysis, particularly with regard to data gathered from the 28 sites, is not well delineated. His criteria for selecting quotations and descriptive details are unclear, leaving the reader to wonder whether they are more rhetorical than analytical. [For additional criticism see Sroufe (2006).] But Levine’s main points, the gist of the story, are ones that have not changed over the last 50 to 60 years. Levine’s narrative voice captures the brute, basic factual outlines. It is not fiction; it is indeed stranger than fiction.

What to Do With the Voice?

After hearing, reading, and recounting the substance of teacher education’s professional dilemmas we frequently go to our own professional corners to do the best we can in our own classes, working in programs that may or may not have a faculty’s

allegiance or sufficient institutional support. As teacher educators we have not gathered together to articulate a more coherent, practically informed, and vision-enhanced plan of teacher preparation. We have the expertise—we should know what to do. Harold Crick seeks counseling and eventually turns to Professor Hilbert for guidance. Certainly if a literary theorist can guide an IRS agent through the quagmire of literary structures and devices, we, as professors of teacher education, can find someone in our field to offer some potential road maps.

There are parallels. Once Harold meets Kay, his author, he pleads for his life. Recall that he has heard Kay intone, “Little did he know that he would soon die.” Harold is told that the novel’s end, his death, is still in rough draft form. He is given the complete text and takes it to Professor Hilbert for him to read. After his read, Hilbert proclaims the work a masterpiece and informs Harold that it is his duty, really his honor, to be authored to his death by such a beautiful and complex text. It is perhaps Kay Eiffel’s greatest work. Harold looks at the professor and asks incredulously, “You mean you expect me to face my death knowingly and with acceptance?” It becomes apparent the answer is yes. Harold struggles and eventually reads his entire life story only to come to the same conclusion. Facing his death, he sees his life more clearly and comes to believe it is fitting that he dies.

Arthur Levine is also narrating a future. Invoking the Holmes Group, he outlines his vision for transforming schools of education into professional schools dedicated to preparing P–12 practitioners. He calls for the demise of teacher education programs that can not meet the quality strictures he provides. He challenges teacher educators to remove their ideological blinders and address “the needs of our children” (p. 114). Like

and syntheses of both complex evidence and distinct intellectual and practical traditions. Levine appropriately urges schools of education to be more responsibly bold in challenging the ways in which university culture and academic knowledge have pushed our narrative in an ineffectual direction. However, we should be tempered in our embrace of a “value-added” narrative, as it may push us toward a similarly ineffective plot line. The challenges that teachers, principals, teacher educators, and schools of education face on the front lines of profound social change do indeed call for transformative thinking about the substance of teacher

References

- Clifford, G., & Guthrie, J. (1988). *Ed school: A brief for professional education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Zeichner, K. (Eds.). (2005). *Studying teacher education: The report of the AERA panel on research and teacher education*. Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Cooke, M., Irby, D., Sullivan, W., & Ludmerer, K. (2006). American medical education 100 years after the Flexner Report. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 355, pp. 1339-1344.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & Bransford, J. (Eds.) (2005). *Preparing teachers for a changing world: What teachers should learn and be able to do*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.