

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

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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*. Well, almost. Admittedly Arthur Levine doesn’t really sound or look like Emma Thompson. But there are parallels here. Levine, the former president of Teachers College–Columbia and now president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, has written *Educating School Teachers*, a report on the dismal state of university-sponsored and alternative routes for teacher education.. Among Levine’s major recommendation are calls to dismantle many programs and to transform schools of education into professional schools focused on “the world of practice and practitioners” (p. 104). The report attempts to capture the professional “life” history of teacher education and points to a viable, albeit challenging, future. In many ways he is re-telling and re-shaping our narratives as teacher educators. In the film *Stranger Than Fiction*, Thompson plays a novelist, Kay Eiffel, an idiosyncratic, rather quirky, reclusive writer who by some strangely conceived design happens to be narrating IRS auditor Harold Crick’s unfolding and somewhat dismal life (played by Will Ferrell). Kay Eiffel describes the conflicts and forces operating in Harold’s life, and points to an ominous future. And so it was oh, so strange to be reading Art Levine, recalling Emma

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.

Dissatisfied with both options and maintaining his own sanity, Harold takes up the suggestion that perhaps he should see someone versed in literature, literary theory. Professor Jules Hilbert (Dustin Hoffman) is the man he seeks. After meeting Harold, Professor Hilbert soon dismisses Harold's auditory sensations as the hallucinatory experiences of a loose hinge. It is only when Harold tells the professor about the voice's foretelling of his death—utilizing the phrase “little did he know”—that Professor Hilbert takes notice. It seems the professor had written an article and offered a semester-long seminar on the use of the third-person omniscient.

Together Harold and Jules attempt to unravel the mystery of the voice while Harold deconstructs his socially efficient life, discovering multiple, nonarithmetical life paths and uncovering some of the mysteries of love with Ana the bohemian baker (Maggie Gyllenhaal). After some trials and tribulations (trying to figure out if Harold's life plot is more akin to a tragedy or comedy and if it is determined more by character or context), Harold and Jules discover Kay Eiffel (Emma Thompson) as the novelist, the voice, the “author” of Harold's life. The story continues, but for our purposes this summary should be sufficient to segue to Arthur Levine's nonfictional narrative of teacher education.

Levine's Educating School Teachers Report

In the second of four planned reports dealing with the state of our country's schools of education, Arthur Levine recounts the results of an ambitious study. Levine examines the state of teacher preparation utilizing a number of distinct data sources including the following: surveys of school principals and school of education deans, faculty, and alumni; a Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) study examining the

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 the engine driving the future of the country and of our children. To obtain a decent job and support a family, children need higher levels of skill and knowledge than ever before. To compete in a global marketplace and sustain a democratic society the United States requires the most educated population in history. For these reasons, the future is in the hands of the nation's teachers. The quality of tomorrow will be no better than the quality of our teacher force. (p. 11)

According to Levine our future teachers need to learn how "to educate all of their students to achieve the highest learning outcomes in history" (p. 11). The fate of our nation, it appears, rests in teacher education. "The task before us is to redesign teacher education for a new era—to produce a greater number of high-quality teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to raise student achievement to the highest levels in history" (p. 12). The narrative sounds somewhat familiar. Our society and economy are in crisis; our economy relies on knowledge. Since schools and teachers deliver knowledge, it's obvious - they need to do a better job. While such introductory remarks, delivered

with a sense of urgency, now seem *de rigueur* for national educational studies, they do little to push the debate or our reflections further. Fortunately, it is in the subsequent substance and analysis that Levine begins to offer material to fuel reflection.

Dilemmas and Confusions

Teacher education is and has been, Levine recounts, a series of conflicts and conundrums. Are we preparing candidates for a craft or a profession? Should they be prepared on the job in schools or beforehand in institutions of higher education? What is the proper preparatory blend between a practice-based orientation and a theoretical framing of teaching, learning, and schooling? Should such preparation occur in the public schools, a university setting, or something more akin to a normal school context? Will state regulation or deregulation force the profession to become clearer about its professional vision? Levine maintains that we are a profession caught amidst these conflicting purposes and understandings. We are a profession without a clear programmatic plan for teacher preparation. Levine argues that “beliefs” and “faith” guide different “clashing” teacher reform efforts (p. 14). What has evolved is an alarming and relativistic diversity of program variation—a “let 1,000 flowers bloom” approach. Teacher education has been and continues to be in flux, and this has left the profession flummoxed.

“Flummoxed,” the voice says, and in doing so it seems to capture important elements. Levine and others in the past (Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Holmes Group, 1995, etc.) have argued that teacher education seems confused about its purposes and means. Levine writes:

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 programs; thus, these fundamental flaws have not been resolved.

The teacher education curriculum, Levine maintains, is in disarray. Education faculties’ efforts to succeed in the model of the university professor have tipped the curriculum too heavily toward theory and paid too little attention to the quality of clinical experiences. “Overall, the result is a curriculum incapable of achieving desired outcomes because of the ambiguity of its goals, and unable to educate teachers effectively because

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 education. A recent analysis within the *New England Journal of Medicine* on the state of medical education 100 years after the Flexner Report asserted, “Medical education seems to be in a state of perpetual unrest” (Cooke, Irby, Sullivan, & Ludmerer, 2006, p. 1339). They found, much like schools of education, the university culture in medical schools also deemphasizes clinical knowledge and undermines quality clinical teaching and supervision. Further, they observed, “Much of what we know about effective interventions is not translated from research settings into everyday patient care” (p. 1342). Nevertheless, schools of medicine appear to have a shared, research-based sense of what comprises the knowledge base for medicine, what clinical expertise looks like, and what acceptable levels of proficiency are for beginning clinical practice. Levine is correct when he says teacher education, as a field, lacks a widely shared, concrete vision of effective practice.

Levine argues that the curriculum is in disarray because education faculty are disconnected from school practice, from the academe, and from scholarship. The faculty, Levine intones,

. . . hold a place between the arts and sciences and the schools, but they are not a part of either. They are natural allies of policy makers, practitioners, and scholars,

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

many in the field today he proposes that teacher education programs be assessed by the “value added” to K–12 student learning. In Levine’s preferred future, teacher education programs will be assessed by calculating the value their graduates add to their K–12 students’ achievement test scores. We think such a calculus of assessment is highly problematic—statistically, substantively, and ethically (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2007). As practicing teacher educators it may or may not be time to face, squarely and clearly, some programmatic deaths. It seems doubtful that Levine’s study will have the political force to bring it about. But we certainly need to confront the debilitating dynamics Levine underscores. What is evident in Levine’s study and prior examinations of teacher education is that the institutional conflicts and conundrums have produced and continue to deliver a highly problematic professional preparation.

The teacher education narrative that Levine recounts is a history that is intolerably repetitive. The conflicts and dilemmas of teacher education have a tendency to undercut quality teacher education. They undermine a move toward a clearly delineated, practically based, conceptually rich teacher education curriculum. We don’t have, as Levine illustrates, a coherent curricular program for teacher education. In some metaphysical and moral sense we write and are written by our professional activities and contexts. Unfortunately the “let 1,000 flowers bloom” approach is not only relativistic but appears nihilistic. In contrast to Harold Crick, as teacher educators, we don’t appear to have a definitive author to whom we can appeal for our professional lives. Levine calls for, but does not provide these curricular guidelines.

But perhaps this is as it should be. Unlike an individual author composing a single character’s life, coherent programs emerge out of many players’ disciplined deliberation

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 education. Such thinking has begun with studies sponsored by the National Academy of Education to outline a research-based curriculum for teacher education (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005); the American Educational Research Association’s sponsored panel that synthesized empirical evidence on teacher education and learning to teach (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005); the study to synthesize data and research on teacher preparation programs in the United States currently being conducted through the National Research Council of the National Academies of Science; and initiatives such as Teachers for a New Era and the Teacher Quality Partnership which are supporting and studying institutions engaged in substantial program revision. However, much more must be done to extend our knowledge base and translate these separate reports and initiatives into a widely and deeply shared vision of “what an entry-level practitioner should know and be able to do” (Levine, 2006, p. 36).

Schools of education and the field of teacher education could benefit from a study group charged with examining critically the work done thus far in the abovementioned and other major synthetic studies. Such a study group, composed of seasoned and wise classroom teachers, teacher educators, and teacher education researchers, could articulate

a more coherent teacher education curricular framework as well as clear images of acceptable performances of understanding. Rarely do we find ourselves in the position to author our own professional lives. It is abundantly clear after 60 years of mordant depictions that we attempt to provide what Arthur Levine says is missing—a coherent curricular rationale for teacher education. .

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