



## Coming to know in the ‘eye of the storm’: A beginning teacher’s introduction to different versions of teacher community

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Different versions of teacher community exist in school contexts.
- They rely on different conceptions of knowledge/views of teachers.
- Beginning teachers experience tensions between different versions of community.
- ‘Stories to live by’ and ‘Stories to leave by’ take shape in school milieus.
- Entry-level teachers struggle to deal with complexities.

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### ABSTRACT

Through the metaphor, “learning to teach in the ‘eye of the storm’”, a beginning teacher’s experiences of teaching in one of America’s diverse urban campuses become known. Three themes of global significance emerge: (1) the similarities and differences between professional learning communities and knowledge communities; (2) the morphing of ‘the eye of the storm’ into ‘a perfect storm’; and (3) the connections between shifting teacher identities and shifting school landscapes. The narrative inquiry foreshadows how the teacher’s ‘story to live by’ became ‘a story to leave by’ as she worked in a urban school district riddled with massive change.

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Anna Dean: I began teaching in the eye of a storm...

(Researcher): How so?

Anna Dean: Let me tell you what happened... (Interview excerpt)

Revolving around beginning teacher, Anna Dean, and her “eye of a storm” experience, this article instantiates one of the Achilles heels of teacher education (Darling Hammond, 2009): the long-standing disconnect between teacher preparation programmes and what subsequently transpires in flesh-and-blood schools. In this work, the Achilles heel disconnect—otherwise known as the theory–practice transfer problem (Korthagen, 2010; Korthagen, Loughran, & Russell, 2006)—spills over to the first year of teaching. While this paper focuses on Anna Dean’s introduction to teacher community in the context of school reform in the state of

Texas, it could easily be a story about any neophyte teacher anywhere around the globe. All beginning teachers transition from preservice teacher education programmes to school settings. All enter scenes that are not of their making (MacIntyre, 1984). All arrive in the midst of unfurling events (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Hence, some things become immediately apparent to them, whereas others become revealed through reflection. Where Anna Dean was concerned, she came to know *in situ* tensions in teacher community at T. P. Yaeger Middle School, a diverse, 1500-student campus engaged in ongoing school reform in the fourth largest urban center in the United States. This research captures changes in teacher community in Anna’s immediate school environment and shows how she, as a newcomer to the campus, unavoidably became embroiled in struggles already underway. Before I introduce Anna’s narrative of learning and living teacher community in the eye of a storm, I present the literature that undergirds this work, my research method and the backdrop of this narrative inquiry.

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## 1. Literature review

Four strands of literature set the context for this research study: (1) the trajectory of U.S. teacher education; (2) the nature of teacher knowledge; (3) the development of teacher identity, and (4) the different versions of teacher community.

### 1.1. The trajectory of U.S. teacher education

American teacher education historically has been driven by supply-and-demand and shaped by the issues of the day. Normal schools first offered teacher education programmes, but soon were replaced by non-degree granting independent colleges. These colleges, in turn, were eventually supplanted by teacher education programmes lodged in comprehensive universities. At the beginning of the 19th century, colleges of education were introduced, and teacher certification as well. As teacher education became more formalized and standardized, theoretical gains were made at a practical loss. The disconnect between what happens in teacher education and what occurs in real-life schools was seeded (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Craig & Ross, 2008; Schwab, 1969).

A major juncture in the development of U.S. teacher education happened in the 1960s when the former Soviet Union beat the U.S. in the race to space. This humiliating experience, along with the initial attempt to desegregate public schools, turned attention to how teachers were prepared and eventually led to a profession of teaching arising from what previously had been a world of practice (Angus, 2001). Unfortunately, U.S. teachers never gained the status of other professionals. Teaching remained, in Schön's (1996) vernacular, "a minor profession" (p. 8). Teachers were held tightly under policy makers' thumbs as the U.S. propensity to fix societal problems through educational policy (Cremin, 1990) took root.

*A Nation at Risk* (ANAR) (1983), a National Commission on Excellence in Education report, kicked off the crisis of the professions (Schön, 1983) that occurred in the 1980s. This crisis was predicted by Schwab (1969) who wrote convincingly of the long-term spinoff effects of theory's estrangement from practice, one being the morphing of the theory–practice divide into a theory–practice-policy split (Craig, 2006). The occurrence of the latter added a further element of complexity to teacher education's Achilles heels. Those working in teaching and teacher education particularly bore the brunt of policy makers' critiques. In addition to the increased alienation of theory from practice and policy, the feminization of the profession also had a part to play in the crisis. The fact that teachers' face-to-face work involved students who were increasingly multicultural and needy was another contributing factor. More and more, official educational policy in the U.S. took direction from studies initiated by well-meaning philanthropies/interest groups and politically-motivated think-tanks. Before too long, independent research produced by professors had no place in policy discussions (Apple, 2008; Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

Ushering in the 2000s in the U.S. was The *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act (2002), a federal policy fashioned on the state of Texas's accountability system, which was designed by a business leader (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Unlike ANAR, the bipartisan NCLB Act had serious consequences. Those states that did not acquiesce to national accountability demands (Ravitch, 2010), or performativity sanctions as they are referred to in Europe and elsewhere (Kelchtermans, 2005), were denied the federal educational funding allocated to them. Business leaders in the U.S. increasingly equated "competition in the international marketplace ... [with] a 'battle of the classrooms'" (Augustin cited in Strauss, 2001, p. 31). Business models, practices and language were quickly funneled into public schools and respect for teachers as professionals rapidly eroded (Apple, 2008), particularly in the state

of Texas, which served as a harbinger of change in teaching and teacher education approaches for the rest of the country (Craig, 2009a). As a test case, Texas is politically conservative, economically prosperous and highly diverse. It is also among the five states with the highest levels of child poverty and among the four states with the lowest per pupil expenditures per annum (Children's Defense Fund, 2011).

Because education is a states' rights issue, as illustrated above, it is not possible to speak of American education as if it is governed by a common set of rules, which is what happens in many countries. In some states, teacher education programmes are offered exclusively by universities. In other states, such as Texas, teacher education takes many forms. Delivery systems range from teacher preparation in public/private universities and colleges; to teacher education in a regional educational office; to teacher education programmes offered by school districts; to teacher education provided by private consultants, reform movements, and through internet companies. For instance, in Houston, where the University of Houston previously prepared almost all of the education graduates in the region, 26 teacher-education providers currently exist. The bottom line is that all of these teacher preparation programmes are approved by the state. Furthermore, any individual with a previous degree can teach in Texas schools as long as they pass a requisite criminal background check and are working toward certification.

As this cursory sketch suggests, the U.S. is experiencing serious educational difficulties. Paradoxically, any solution proffered thus far has included stronger teacher education (Angus, 2001). In Levine's (2006) searing critique of American schools of education, he wryly noted that all factions of the U.S. political spectrum believe the development of quality teachers is the key to the nation's economic and educational woes. But the confounding snag is this: the country is "deeply divided" (Levine, 2006, p. 1) about what changes need to be made.

### 1.2. The nature of teacher knowledge

At the core of the movement of American teacher education programmes from normal schools to colleges to universities to free market choices sits several Achilles heel-related questions, namely, what constitutes teacher knowledge, how it is developed, and who officially can authorize it (Ben-Peretz, 2011; Clandinin, 2000). After the U.S.'s unsuccessful race to space, a major effort was made to formalize teacher knowledge in the manner of the sciences. Organic, intuitive kinds of teacher knowing were marginalized and/or obliterated, while scientific forms were codified and reified. External experts became educational consultants, while local teachers were confined to curriculum-implementer roles (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992) where they worked as agents of the state, paid to do its bidding.

In the 1980s, however, a major change took place concerning how teacher knowledge was conceived and studied. The International Study Association of Teachers and Teaching (ISATT) best exemplifies the paradigm shift that occurred. Members of ISATT, who hail from 45 nations, advocated for the study of teaching from the 'inside out.' This transformation meant it was no longer sufficient to capture teachers' knowledge in other people's terms. It became widely recognized that knowledge culled from experience is not able to be "tested, packaged, imparted and sent like bricks across countr[ies] to build knowledge structures that are said to accumulate" (Eisner, 1997, p. 7). This is because the teacher, like the student, is indispensable to the body of knowledge that exists (i.e., Dewey & Bentley, 1949) and essential to the curriculum making act (Schwab, 1983).

In the early 1990s, Fenstermacher (1994) conducted a survey of the literature on teachers' knowledge. In his review, Fenstermacher named three leading international research programmes. One

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