Preservice Teacher Education Using Flexible, Thematic Cohorts

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The future of preservice teacher education is a matter of intense debate as schools of education face challenges of limited resources, increased state regulation, alternative licensing schemes, and continued demands for teacher reform. One area where reports and studies appear to agree is that improvement "...must be linked to reform in the institutional conditions within which teacher education programs exist" (Liston & Zeichner, 1991, p. 3). Furthermore, Ashton and Crocker (1987) called for the systematic study of planned variations in teacher education programs that are undergoing change, and documentation of these small reforms to build up a body of knowledge for the future study of successes and failures of these programs for historical as well as practical uses.

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The purposes of this paper are to describe one school of education's response to the call for reform and to outline those qualities unique to institutional change experienced in its evolution from a four-year, undergraduate program to a fifth-year, graduate teacher preparation program that features thematic cohorts of students. In addition, profiles of four of these cohorts will illustrate the result of this effort.

Portland State University (PSU) has five years of experience with a graduate, fifth-year teacher preparation program that features thematic cohorts. Cohorts are groups of 15 to 30 teacher candidates who begin and complete a program together. Cohort members are admitted at one time, take classes together, are grouped in field placements, experience retreats and team building activities, share a faculty team, and engage in reflection about their work. Each cohort has an identified faculty leader and staff of instructors and supervisors.

More conventional programs generally have individual students encounter faculty in independent courses from a required list, with each course having a different topic and emphasis, and then assigned individually to available field placements. In contrast, each of the PSU cohorts centers on a single theme of professional practice, for example classrooms as families, work force preparation issues, or inclusive education. While cohorts vary thematically, all use the same program framework to insure competency in planning, curriculum, instruction, pupil assessment, classroom management, teacher reflection, and professional development. A basic course/activity structure forms the beginning design of each cohort. All graduates face the same institutional and state expectations for teacher licensing.

Advantages for students and faculty in the cohort system are considerable. For example, faculty members are available for students throughout the year, and not just during the quarter in which a specific class is taught. Topics can be introduced and then revisited when applications happen in field settings. Also, students can see faculty in the public school context, where credibility is established with real pupils, teachers, and administrators. Advantages for cohort faculty correspond to those of students. For example, faculty get to extend their teaching throughout the year and in specific applications. Finally, faculty are able to guide students in connecting course theory with classroom practices.

Some cohorts recruit and admit with an emphasis intended to support the theme. For example, the Work Force Preparation cohort favored applicants with significant work force experience (*e.g*., personnel management, farming, social work, and banking). In other cohorts, students were selected to encourage interest and success in urban settings, or with diverse student populations. For these groups, admission criteria included experience with community organizations (*e.g*., Urban League).

Institutional change at PSU produced innovations in content, organization, pedagogy, and social relations among students, faculty, and educators in cooperating school districts. Specifically, the characteristics of the PSU's flexible cohort program include:

a) a **flexible-systems**, problem solving approach to teacher education,
b) increased **collaboration** with public schools,
c) heightened professional knowledge **consensus** ,
d) increased **collaboration** with other university departments, and

e) teacher candidates with **specialized expertise** in current educational innova-
tions that distinguish them in the job market.

Program Design Features

Flexible Systems in Teacher Education

Although the course description frameworks of the fifth-year graduate teacher education program are fixed according to a plan approved three years earlier by the Oregon State Teacher Standards and Practices Commission, the cohort structure affords flexibility with respect to emphases on theme, methods, materials, and field placements. By using this flexibility, encouraging it in the schools and with preservice teachers, and by teaching the importance of flexibility in education, we maintain high levels of intellectual excitement and professional growth.

The flexibility built into the Cohort design means that the **entire** teacher education program does not have to be designed around a single educational idea, but that **parts** of the program can be engaged in state-of-the-art timely topics of inquiry. This program flexibility enables PSU to address a variety of important emphases, and provides a breakthrough from the former factory-model, single-theme approach. Robert Reich and other social economists have advocated institutional restructuring in business and education that enables organizations to be engaged in the best interests of their clients.

Reich (1983) distinguished between "high volume, standardized" systems and "flexible" systems for production or organizations. **Standardized systems** seek to make one major solution or innovation to a problem, and then to capitalize on this invention by reproducing it on a large scale. Standardized systems in teacher education produce programs with the best available knowledge base, competencies, course requirements and products—and then repeat this program with a steady stream of teacher candidates. Quality is defined by how close graduates come to the ideal specifications. Improvement in the standardized system program comes by carefully controlled tinkering with components to refine the overall program.

By contrast, **flexible systems** organize subgroups around a specific problem or opportunity, and temporarily capitalize on the skills of a performance team to directly address the needs of the situation. Flexible systems in teacher education assemble a skillful teacher education staff, and engage them in a specific problem opportunity. Quality is defined by how well a particular group of teacher candidates addresses the situation, **and** how well they are able to participate in subsequent situations. Improvement in the flexible system program comes by increasing the skills of the staff.

Reich (1983) pointed out that standardized and flexible systems in business and education are not merely different preferred styles, but that flexible systems are clearly superior in the current society. He gave compelling evidence of the

economic costs of remaining with traditional standardized organizational systems, and becoming increasingly uncompetitive in the rapidly changing world economy. Reich extended this criticism to the overwhelming predominance of standardized systems in American education, which he described as increasingly losing quality in relation to educational systems of other countries. In emulating an image of corporate business, education is guilty of promoting inflexible, uncritical, thought-less outcomes. "Few students are taught how to work collaboratively to solve novel real-world problems—the essence of flexible-system production" (p. 215). Such education can only exacerbate the problems of an economy desperately in need of creative problem solvers.

Reich's criticisms of the American educational system apply to teacher education programs based on standardized designs:

> U.S. education has been modeled on scientific management. Students are sorted, programmed, and controlled in a high-volume, standardized production process essentially like any other. Knowledge is divided and subdivided into discrete units, delivered according to preset instructions, and monitored at regular intervals through standardized examinations—precisely Frederick Taylor's prescription of specialization by simplification, preestablished rules, and feedback information. Students move through high schools and universities as if they were on a conveyor belt. (p. 216)

Many teacher education programs dwell on detailed specifications for courses, competencies, outcomes, and accountability. In this and other methods of standardization, they move teacher candidates through as if they were on a conveyor belt.

In contrast, the PSU program sought to avoid division of knowledge, overly detailed instructions for cohorts, a dominating central theme, and a program based on many preestablished rules. Reich's advice about organizations was taken in order to train beginning teachers in the skills and attitudes needed in the new global economy:

> Collaborative and innovative problem-solving skills simply cannot easily be learned in a routine and tightly controlled environment. People cannot be trained to participate in flexible-system enterprises when their daily lives are dominated by high-volume, standardized institutions. Children cannot learn to take responsibility and to work creatively within an atmosphere that discourages personal responsibility and rewards rote responses. America's schools and universities have come to mirror American firms—rigid systems for achieving economies of scale, impressively efficient but incapable of imaginative responses. (p. 216)

The PSU design was to break up the routine and tight controls of typical teacher education programs. The intent was to open up the daily experience of the student teachers to the extent that their cohort leaders take responsibility for being innovative. The choice was for greater imagination with the price of some loss of overall program efficiency in scheduling and use of resources.

Increased School Collaboration

Each cohort faculty team has the opportunity to plan for approximately one year before students begin their program. This planning time enables the faculty to identify public schools for collaboration and for mutual study **before** beginning the actual teacher preparation. Each cohort declares a theme that already is under development in the cooperating schools, *e.g.*, focus on at-risk youth, literacy, inclusive education, professional teamwork, or integrated curriculum. Themes may be identified by university faculty, public school persons, or in combination. Then, faculty from both the university and the public schools (usually three to six per cohort) work together for a year preparing for the following year of preservice student teaching, in order to advance understanding of the theme and to prepare effective beginning teachers.

Often, the preparation year includes inservice courses by PSU faculty on topics associated with the theme. For example, one elementary cohort addressed "teacher leadership" issues for two years before the preservice teachers began their program. A secondary cohort provided three quarter-long inservice courses on "writing curriculum for work-force preparation." The Teachers in the Classrooms as Families cohort studied family structures and dynamics through a counseling course before the preservice teachers began their program. Through these mutual activities, university faculty cohort leaders begin collaboration with schools based on emerging educational themes that subsequently include teacher candidates as partners in development.

The effect of this thematic collaboration is to form professional relationships between university and public school practitioners that are based on important educational ideas, and then to extend this relationship to the task of preparing teachers. University and school faculty are given the opportunity to work on mutual understandings before beginning the work of teacher education.

One example of thematic collaboration is illustrated in the Work Force cohort. University faculty worked with a local high school to write curriculum and to initiate instructional ideas that are suitable both to learning in schools and to the work place (*e.g.*, cooperative learning and relationship education). Inservice workshops with teachers were conducted by PSU faculty who subsequently taught the same methods and techniques to teacher candidates. Furthermore, materials that were developed collectively for field-testing in the schools were incorporated into preservice classes as well. The result of this collaborative design is that important developments that serve today's children and youth and tomorrow's needs are offered to beginning teachers in settings with unusually high levels of cooperation and understanding between university and public school faculty. In turn, public schools have been assisted with their own educational change (Sarason, 1982).

"High Consensus" Teacher Education

Thematic cohorts provide university faculty and classroom teachers with opportunities for preparing teachers with high levels of agreement about topics, goals, procedures, and evaluation. Kagan (1990) pointed out the hazards of educators working in environments that have low consensus about where they are headed and what techniques to use to get there. She cited Little's (1982) findings that effective schools share a common professional culture, while ineffective schools show scant agreement about objectives, values, strategies, and indicators of success. Many organizational theorists (*e.g*., Peters & Waterman, 1982; Scott, 1981) have pointed out that successful human enterprises require members to have a shared sense of direction and an agreed-upon basis for action and decision making.

However, most schools and teacher education programs do **not** have this consensus, but rather are characteristically "ill-structured" in that they show uncertainty about how lessons are supposed to go, lack links between teaching and learning, are unclear about criteria for success, and even disagree on how to measure learning! Kagan described schools of education as places where doubt abounds and agreement flees. "With no common professional culture, colleges of education are merely collections of tensions..." (p. 46) among theory/research/practice, differences between university scholars and practitioners, and socioeconomic disparities between public school and university personnel.

Kagan offered as a remedy to these tensions "...the extended use of **subprograms** [emphasis added] in preservice teacher education consisting of a sequence of courses and field experiences that reflect the common technical culture of a small group of faculty" (p. 51). She pointed to earlier descriptions of Howey and Zimpher (1989) of teacher education subprograms taking on the form of specializations or subgroups. The PSU thematic cohorts are subprograms or specializations in teacher education.

Increased Collaboration with University Departments

Teacher education programs have a history of alienation from other university departments, including other disciplines and other departments within schools of education. For example, history departments may be quite distant from the preparation of high school social studies teachers (Clifford & Guthrie, 1989), or special education faculty may rarely see a "mainstream" elementary school teacher candidate. Planning for an individual, one-time cohort makes collaboration with other university departments more feasible. Barriers between academic units are easier to dissolve for a single specific interaction than for a long term joining of departments. *Ad hoc* collaborations are more simple to support than are permanent reorganizations.

Teacher Candidates with Distinctive Educational Specialties

While each cohort has a fundamental organization representing the basic requirements for good teaching (*e.g*., planning, instructing, evaluating, managing), the flexible cohort structure enables candidates to be identified with an extra competence (*e.g*., classroom relationships, inclusion schemes, community skills). These additional skills and insights are attractive to school district personnel directors. For example, the Work Force cohort produced candidates who served on school reform committees, know the needs of the business community for high school graduate competence, and developed and used work force preparation curriculum.

Development of Flexible System Cohorts

PSU had a history of traditional standardized system, large-scale-production teacher preparation. One exception, the Cooperative Professional Education Program (CPEP), a year-long alternative teacher intern program, was offered to 25 to 30 students per year from 1983 to 1990 (Driscoll & Strouse, 1988; Nagel & Driscoll, 1991). The history of this program provides insights about the value of educator consensus and a culture of support. The CPEP program represented state-of-the-art collaboration with public schools. However, the university faculty involvement was limited to the two faculty leading the program and several "drop in" specialty instructors. Two key CPEP faculty instructors began the program as newly-hired outsiders.

In contrast to its record of success outside of the Department (ATE outstanding program award finalist, school district requests for expansion, hiring record of graduates twice the conventional program), CPEP was poorly accepted and supported by the mainstream faculty. A lack of faculty involvement in planning and consensus about directions and approaches resulted in the program functioning as an isolated subgroup. This isolation created the conditions that Kagan (1990) described as a "fearful battleground" for faculty to defend their personal beliefs and practices in order to cope with the ambiguities and uncertainties of their profession. The resulting tension exacerbated the conflict inherent in teacher education programs and lead to the eventual discontinuation of CPEP.

Development of the Flexible Cohorts Program

The Oregon Teacher Standards and Practices Commission stimulated the PSU restructuring when it mandated a change from undergraduate, four-year teacher education programs to graduate, fifth-year designs. As a part of state-initiated restructuring, the PSU teacher education faculty installed a cohort system of planned subgroups. Instead of separating out one single program for innovation, the entire new program consisted of planned innovative and distinctive cohorts. These

provide the flexible-system approach that uses collaborative and innovative problem-solving skills in non-routine and loosely-controlled environments. Since the entire faculty is involved in one or more innovative cohorts, the need to defend individual innovators has disappeared.

However, the change to the flexible cohorts program was not a consensus decision among the teacher education faculty. In fact, the ratification vote to make the institutional changes received a **negative** majority the summer before the program was to begin. The decision to change and transition itself created a fearful battleground of a faculty without consensus.

Five forces combined to break the conflict and move the entire program to a graduate fifth-year design with flexible cohorts structure. First, the department's design committee acted decisively and strongly. The group consisted of three teacher education faculty, two public school persons, representatives from two other university departments, one Special Education Department faculty member, and an associate dean of education. (Two of the three department members, who later resisted the proposed changes, missed all of the eight planning sessions). Second, the design committee chairperson advocated strongly for the work of the committee. Third, the dean of the School of Education took a strong stand in support of the committee proposal. At one point, the planning committee chairperson was willing to withdraw the proposal because he was discouraged by the split, and by mostly negative teacher education faculty reaction to the plan and to a guest expert on reflective practice. However, the dean stated that he would not sign off on any plan that did **not** include cohorts and reflective practice as central design features. Fourth, the transition took place during a time in which retirements and resignations depleted the numbers of faculty opposed to the change. Fifth, a vigorous pilot program of the first two cohorts was made successful by eight teacher education faculty working as a team and a new, supportive department chairperson. Thus, a move for greater consensus in a teacher education program was made in an environment that itself lacked consensus. The current faculty and field acceptance of the flexible cohorts design are strongly positive.

Examples of Flexible Cohorts

Work Force Development Issues

Applicants to the Work Force cohort were selected from the applicant pool for strong academic record, experience in the community and work force, experience in organizations, high NTE scores, and performance in group problem-solving simulations. Candidates were selected to be both subject matter experts and experts in analysis, innovation, imagination, and communication concerning social problems.

Half of the preparation program involved public school student teaching and

community and work place study. School sites were selected to give experience with teacher teams already involved in work force issues. Candidates student taught in schools already engaged in work force education. Students completed a work force curriculum that included: SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Necessary Skills) report recommendations (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1991), principles of applied academics, integration of academic and vocational education (Grubb, *et al*., 1991), and curriculum construction for work force issues. Training in team work (Larson & LeFasto, 1989), cooperative learning, direct communication, and small group problem-solving were completed and then applied to real world classroom problems. Candidates prepared both as excellent classroom teachers **and** to work in the teacher, school, and community teams that are key to work force environments.

Classrooms as Families

Representatives from six school districts contacted the PSU School of Education to discuss increasing concerns about both students and teachers "at risk" of not achieving success. For two years a collaborative group of 25 school teachers, 12 administrators, and 10 university faculty shared problems, successes, and needs of people as learners and teachers in their own settings. The group examined national reports and research studies of students whose home and community experiences were a mismatch with traditional school experiences (Pallas, Natriello & McDill, 1989). The result was a decision to use the ideal of "family" to think of classrooms as places that provide support, relationships, and caring as a milieu for learning. From that priority came plans for a program to prepare both preservice and inservice teachers.

Cohort planners connected two assumptions about the way in which children view families in relation to their classroom experience. First, classrooms with many of the features of families—expectations, relationships, responsibilities, support—are a familiar bridge to many children as they begin school (an otherwise striking departure from their home experience). This idea recalls the practice in Israel of holding kindergartens in local apartments so that children begin school in rooms similar to what they experience with their families. A second assumption was that for some children the ideal of "family" support and nurturing was **not** a part of their experience outside of school. For these children, school can to some degree provide the social experience that their families may not have the opportunity or resources to provide.

Three months of study about family systems, structures, and dynamics was integrated with detailed planning for a student cohort. Experienced teachers who would mentor the students and faculty who would lead the cohort participated in both study and planning. The planning process merged practitioner and faculty expertise and support into a learning community. This process was a response to the call for an increased role for classroom practitioners in teacher education (Holmes Group, 1986; Kennedy, 1990). Faculty and teachers made collaborative decisions

on course structure, content, assignments, readings, instructors, and classroom placements. The planning quickly eliminated the traditional lack of awareness of the overall goals of preparation programs on the part of classroom cooperating teachers (O'Neil, 1991) and resulted in the kind of equal partner relationship recommended by Goodlad (1991). Preservice teachers joined a family-like structure with faculty and practitioners, with feelings of affection and admiration among participants. One teacher described it as "a collegiality of mind and heart."

Literacy Issues

The Literacy Issues cohort received its name because course content and field placements emphasized reading instruction in early grades and subsequent development of literacy tied to childrens' real life experience. However, a more unique feature in this cohort was the design to have preservice teacher candidates take university course work **with** their cooperating teachers in the following topics: action research, multicultural education, classroom management, and the reflective practitioner. While some course assignments and expectations differed for the two groups, beginning and veteran teachers benefited by working together in graduate classes and then in their classrooms. The result for student teachers was a unique learning situation of inquiry, experimentation, and new program development. They not only received up-to-date content, but saw first hand how experienced teachers innovate.

Inclusive Education

Inclusive Education advocates and supports "mainstreaming" of as many types of students into regular classrooms as is possible. Dedication to equal opportunity and teaching to—and appreciating—diversity suggest a policy of inclusion in public schools. How well all members of a community are accepted is a moral issue and illustrative of the values of a society. Too often, schools have not been a place of inclusion for those of differing abilities, ethnic backgrounds, and beliefs.

In support of the Inclusive Education theme, cohort organizers from three departments within the School of Education (Curriculum & Instruction, Special Education, and Educational Policy, Foundations and Administration) developed a secondary teacher education program. The goal was for expertise that both helps schools to become inclusive, and furthers schools that are already inclusive in their programs and practices but are in need of regular academic faculty with specialized training. Thus, these formerly separate competencies of regular education, multicultural education, and special education were planned as integral parts of the cohort (Stainback & Stainback, 1987).

Instructional strategies for the cohort were selected to be state-of-the-art. As Brophy (1986) pointed out, "...research has turned up very little evidence suggesting the need for qualitatively different forms of instruction for students who differ in aptitude, achievement level, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or learning style"

(p. 122). The Inclusive Education cohort stressed adaptive teaching and the use of "scaffolding" (Brown & Campione, 1986), cooperative learning (Slavin, Stevens & Madden, 1988), alternative forms of assessment (Perrone, 1991), peer-tutoring (U.S. Department of Education, 1986), and team teaching (Huefner, 1988).

The first quarter of the Inclusive Education cohort was devoted to field observations of schools (both inclusive and non-inclusive) and of community service centers for the handicapped and special learners (school for the blind, school for emotionally disturbed adolescents, outreach center for handicapped adults, and a school for severely learning impaired). Cohort members additionally completed courses on methods of instruction in respective academic disciplines, teaching and learning, classroom management, media and technology, and special learners.

After training in educational ethnography (Wolcott, 1988), teacher candidates visited and volunteered in community service centers for the handicapped and special learners. In these settings, they investigated the educational needs and aspirations of students and staff. They used ethnographic journals in weekly seminars to discuss observations from community sites (20 hours) and from field observations in public schools (30 hours). Study groups were formed to include at least one student teacher from each of the different community sites, and students collaborated to write a research monograph on inclusive education.

During the second and third academic quarters, all Cohort members were placed in inclusive schools for student teaching. There they gained first-hand experience with teaching to a broad range of student abilities. In addition, the university supervisors, whose expertise lies mainly in the academic disciplines of instruction, also observed adaptive teaching to diverse and inclusive classrooms. As a result, these supervision assignments challenged faculty to continue their own education in inclusive schooling. Faculty seminars, organizational meetings, guest speaking engagements, site recommendations, and research collaborations resulted from the commitment to prepare future educators who can teach to all students in classrooms that model caring communities.

Comparative Results

Various cohorts have been generally equivalent in field evaluation reports, grades received, and reported levels of satisfaction of participants. Job placement rates have been slightly different, but these data are confounded by a changing job market and levels and subject areas taught.

Test scores also have been comparable, as exemplified by the data from three simultaneous cohorts presented in Table 1. Table 1 presents test score means by cohort for the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST) presented by students at program admissions and the National Teachers' Examination Professional Knowledge (PK) Test taken by students at the conclusion of the teacher education program. The three cohorts were Classrooms as Families (elementary),

Table 1
Test Score Means (S.D.) for Three Cohorts

Cohort	CBEST (entrance)	Profesional Knowledge (exit)
Design Technology	172.40 (24.85)	672.16 (5.61)
Classrooms as Families	150.43 (19.17)	669.39 (6.12)
Community Study	174.44 (16.75)	672.19 (3.72)

Design Technology (elementary), and Community Study (secondary).

A covariate analysis of variance of PK scores at program exit showed no statistically significant difference among cohorts at the end of the program ($F=1.53$; $df=2,57$; $p=.22$). This equivalent result happened in spite of the vastly different approaches to study of professional knowledge content in the three cohorts. The approaches ranged from traditional university course with textbook and multiple choice examinations (approximating the PK Test) in one cohort, to field-based, case study, collected readings, and discussions in another cohort. The covariate analysis took into account the significantly lower CBEST scores at entrance for one cohort ($F=6.59$; $df=2,59$; $p<.01$), since the two tests correlated at $r=0.62$ for this sample.

Theoretical Significance of Flexible Cohorts

Flexible, thematic cohorts have a significance beyond merely being more convenient, or more agreeable among a diverse faculty. The theoretical significance of flexible cohorts is that the **assembly** of committed personnel, defensible theme, and provisional consensus produces quality teacher preparation. This is in contrast to the theoretical position that there is a **single** theme or strategy where the value is inherent and independent of the organization. This does not mean that the specific theme is irrelevant: Some themes are better than others. However, this theoretical perspective of multiple correct solutions makes quality teacher preparation a more complicated task than a simple search for a single, demonstrably superior approach. Instead, good teacher education encompasses a good idea, a good context, agreement, demonstrable success, and a given life span.

Disadvantages of Flexible Cohorts

While flexible, thematic cohorts provide many valuable innovations for teacher preparation, they also present significant disadvantages that need attention. For example, flexibility is reduced for students in several ways. Custom collections of courses, schedules, and field placements are rarely possible. This means that students with individual needs or preferences are not able to plan programs to match their situations. A second kind of diminished flexibility arises because cohort topics are not selected by students, and thus may not reflect their primary interests. For

example, an Urban Studies Cohort spent less total time in suburban settings, the target of some students' main focus. Remedies for these disadvantages consist of some individual student level of compensation decided upon by the cohort leader and staff. For example, some students wanted to teach in rural settings were assigned to those schools when most students were in inner-city placements.

Another set of disadvantages of flexible cohorts concerns university faculty. For one thing, teaching is more demanding. It occurs in a context of close human relationships built from cooperative planning and collaboration in field settings. The teaching must have a good connection between theory and practice, because it is tested in actual public schools. Remedies for these disadvantages consist of volunteer faculty (or hiring where the program model is clearly described) and protected "off time" of parts of the year when faculty are protected in their "professorial" work (*e.g.*, publishing, graduate seminar teaching, university committees).

Conclusions

A close examination of PSU's flexible cohort program demonstrates that students, university faculty, and school district personnel are engaged in instructional experimentation, timely curriculum development, and the evolution of educational organizations that provide choices and reflective decision making. Increased communication between the university and participating school districts resulted in vision, direction, and resources the school of education could not provide alone. Finally, the pervasive efforts of all concerned to grapple with intellectual and moral demands of education in a democratic society (Goodlad, 1990) continues to be both a challenge and an opportunity, providing tensions as well as energizing excitement.

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