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# Preface: Challenging the Politics of the Teacher Accountability Movement

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## Preface

*Gail M. Boldt*

In January, President Obama went to the University of Michigan to announce new measures designed to battle the rising costs of college tuition. Speaking to an enthusiastic crowd of students, the President promised: "We are putting colleges on notice—you can't keep, you can't assume that you'll just jack up tuition every single year. If you can't stop tuition from going up, then the funding you get from taxpayers each year will go down. We should push colleges to do better. We should hold them accountable if they don't" (*Huffington Post*, 2012).

For anyone who has worked in pre-kindergarten through high school public education over the past decade, the significance of the President's use of the term "accountable" could not be missed. By now, ten years after the passage of No Child Left Behind and three years into Race to the Top, the carrot and stick approach—"Do what we say and hope to be rewarded; fail to do what we say and expect punishment"—has become entrenched in the consciousness of American educators. The rise to prominence of the accountability discourse has been a part of a drive to privatize a once public sector, supported by a nation-wide adoption of the belief that 1) the private sector is effectively regulated by mechanisms at play in the marketplace and that 2) this model provides an ideal for the reformation of public education.

Central to the drive for privatization has been the assumption that teachers need to become subject to the rigors of empirically determined approaches for increased efficiency, best practices, and quantifiable measures of effectiveness to assure that every penny of funding was well spent and that nothing was wasted (Shore and Wright, 2000). Of course, such an approach required reducing what counts as worthwhile education to a standardized list of measurable goals determined by outside experts which also, not coincidentally, allowed for the scaling of commercial curriculum and training that made education an ever more attractive field for corporate and venture capitalist investment (Ash, 2012).

It has not escaped the notice of those of us who work in university-level teacher education programs that thus far, our K-12 colleagues have borne the brunt of demonization and deprofessionalization, of the dehumanizing effects of standardization in their relationships with students and the impoverishment of curriculum. Still, because the work of university-level teacher education is tied to state departments of education for teacher licensure, teacher educators have not escaped assaults on our professional judgment or academic freedom when it comes to the ways we teach and assess our students. The President's announcement that universities will increasingly be subjected to the same kinds of accountability measures that we have seen applied to primary and secondary school educators sends chills down our spines; many of us have long feared that it was only a matter of time until we suffered a similar loss of control over our professional lives and the things we hold most dear that our K-12 colleagues have already faced.

I was an elementary school teacher in the decade of the 1990's, in a time and place where I had not only substantial control over the daily curriculum, but also real support and mentoring as I struggled with the incredibly difficult and incredibly rewarding task of becoming the best teacher I could be for the unique group of children who year after year came into my classroom. The principal of the school where I taught called the teachers her "brain trust." She simultaneously held us to high expectations for what our students could accomplish and queried us about what we needed to achieve those things with our students. I remember my years in that school as the best kind of exhausting and all-consuming challenge. For me and other teachers at that school, the reward for our investment of blood, sweat and tears and the reward to the administration for the investment of respect, resources and time, came in our ability to work individually and collegially toward the creation of classrooms in which both students and teachers could often find their best selves.

Despite everything that has changed in the years I have been out of an elementary classroom, I continue to work with my teacher education students as if expert teacher knowledge and passion still matter. My students are smart and talented and they long to create rich and meaningful classrooms where all children can succeed in ways that exceed what is imagined and valued in many of the standardized curricula and tests that they must implement as teachers. Still, I worry with them about how to navigate the demands for teaching to measures of market efficiency and impoverished proofs of effectiveness and yet still find the support, commitment and imagination to rise above the current deadening state of education. The President's speech simply compounds that worry for me, as I wonder how my classroom practices may be forced to change in the brave new world "value added" university education.

In the spring of 2011, just as the protests over Wisconsin governor Scott Walker's assault on public sector unions were in full force, I met Bill Ayers at a discussion held among teachers and university faculty at Park Forest Elementary School in State College, Pennsylvania. Under the leadership of Principal Donnan Stoicovy, Park Forest teachers work deliberately with students to create a school community in which all members are thoughtful and active participants in a democratic approach to education. Not surprisingly, the relationship between the state of American democracy and the deprofessionalization of teachers was a frequent topic of conversation. At one point, our talk turned to the need for high profile efforts to take back the discourses about teachers and education.

This was the conversation that was on my mind when I proposed this special issue of the Bank Street Occasional Papers, *Challenging the Politics of the Teacher Accountability Movement: Toward a More Hopeful Educational Future*. I was delighted that Bill Ayers agreed to join me as co-editor. In this issue, we present a series of short essays by eleven leading American educators. We invited each contributor to submit what we envisioned as expressions of concern, conviction, passion, and even anger over the discourses currently at play and the impact of the teacher accountability movement on the future of education. We hope that readers will share our excitement about reading the commentaries of these educators who agreed to write this issue with us.

To maximize the impact of these essays, we are releasing them in three groups (authors and titles below). The first group, released with this preface, includes Bill Ayers' introduction and three essays that lay out analyses and criticisms of the languages and logics that have framed the accountability movement. The second group, to be released two weeks later, includes reports from classrooms, schools and districts—dispatches from the field. The third group primarily addresses the future, calling for a different set of values and priorities and a different understanding of educational reform. We will release this group two weeks after the second group. When completed, the entire collection will be found as a single journal issue on this website.

Our goal is that this collection, available as free on-line content, will serve as an electronic manifesto. It is intended as a resource for anyone concerned with re-framing and taking back the educational conversation, moving toward meaningful school reform that is based in a commitment to creating conditions under which teachers can develop the kinds of complex and sophisticated professional knowledges and practices that support authentic student learning. We imagine the focused brevity and strong language of these pieces lending to their usability. We invite anyone who wishes to join us in taking back the discourses of teaching and education to use these essays promiscuously and with the same passionate abandon you will find within them.

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