Against Boldness

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This special issue, “Bold Ideas for a New Era in Teacher Education, Teacher Preparation, and Teacher Practice,” seeks to examine the impact of bold ideas on our field. Authors were asked to propose particular bold ideas that they wanted to examine. I proposed to examine the concept of bold ideas itself. In this article, I challenge the notion that boldness is an inherently good thing. I am not arguing against any of the particular examples of bold ideas offered in this special issue, rather I argue against the pursuit of boldness per se.

We live in a complex interconnected world where actors and institutions can have numerous intentional or unintentional influences on one another. The practices we devise as teachers, teacher educators, or researchers reflect our responses to a wide range of considerations as we try to accommodate a variety of interests, rules, and circumstances. Teachers must accommodate their colleagues and principals, as well as a variety of rules promulgated by their school and their district and rules imposed by multiple state and federal institutions. They must accommodate the varied and idiosyncratic needs of their students and their students’ parents. They accommodate the space they are given, the materials they are given, and the scheduling constraints they are given. They may also accommodate, or at least tolerate, helpful interventions by well-meaning businesses or other community groups, all trying to help schools but at the same time imposing new constraints on them.

Managing this complex web of interests, rules, constraints, and expectations is no simple feat. But that is not all that teachers must contend with. Even in their moment-to-moment activity they are cognizant of multiple and often conflicting goals: They want to foster learning, of course, but they also want to maintain harmonious relations within the classroom, encourage their more shy students and discourage their more boisterous ones, finish class on time, get through some set of pages in their textbook, and make the whole thing interesting for students (Kennedy, 2004). Adding to this difficulty is the fact that the many goals we hold for teaching are contradictory. They cannot all be met; for often the solution to one problem is the cause of another. Teachers balance the needs of individuals against the needs of the group, the need for thought with the need for activity, the need for review with the need to add new material.

Teacher education programs are similarly compromised, for they must accommodate the rules and customs of their academic institutions and of the content area programs on their campuses (for a history of this tension, see Labaree, 2008), not to mention their state education agencies, their accreditation agencies, their alumni, and their students. Like teachers, their practices reflect negotiated compromises among varying interests, constraints, and regulations. And, like teachers, they hold numerous and conflicting ideals. They balance the need to give teachers tools for immediate survival with the need to give them the analytic skills needed to continue to grow and develop over time. They balance the need to provide knowledge of student learning with the need to provide knowledge of content. They balance the need to instill professional knowledge and skill with the need to instill a sense of social responsibility. They want their future teachers to understand their own students as well as the subjects they teach, to have strong enough personalities to organize and manage classroom life, but also to have a view about the role of schools in society and about their own potential to contribute to a better society. We have so many persistent and intractable dilemmas in teacher education that the most recent handbook on teacher education was organized around enduring questions rather than around the latest answers (Cochran-Smith, Feiman Nemser, & McIntyre, 2008).

These complex and multifaceted circumstances are burdensome for both teachers and teacher educators, not only because the circumstances themselves are difficult to navigate but also because people who choose to go into teaching or teacher education tend to be, by nature, idealistic people. They choose these professions because they have visions of a more perfect world, one not so constrained as this one is. So it is easy for both teachers and teacher educators to feel trapped in their circumstances, to feel that they are being hindered from doing their best possible job. There is a continuing sense that we are missing the boat, leaving some students behind, failing to live up to our own expectations.

Perhaps the gap between our ideals and the messy truth of our situation leads us to yearn for more forceful responses, hence our interest in bold initiatives. But this is not a practice that invites bold moves. It is a practice that is built from negotiation, compromise, and caution. Lampert (1985) called it “dilemma management.” There are so many goals and so many constraints in this work that no practitioner could possibly feel free to pursue a bold idea.

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In fact, I argue that bold ideas are part of our problem, for by definition they are unrealistic, out of range, over the top. Ultimately, bold ideas fail because they don’t take real circumstances into account or because they expect too much from people. Eventually, each of us runs out of gas, gets tired and disheartened. Bold ideas require too much change. People resist, and new initiatives fall apart.

In the following I examine four versions of the concept of boldness and show why each ultimately offers false hope. The first version refers to scale. That is, pursuing full-blown change rather than piecemeal change could be considered bold. Another version of bold is that it is fearless, rather than hesitant or cautious. Yet a third version of the term has to do with how unusual or unexpected an idea is. Ideas that represent radical departures from past practice are considered bold. Finally, we sometimes think of bold as a social process, a movement, like the sort of collective action that Martin Luther King organized in the 1960s. The movement itself was bold.

In the following sections I examine each of these versions of “boldness” and show why they do not necessarily enhance our work. At the end of the article I propose that what we need in education are ideas that develop slowly and incrementally.

**“Bold” as Full-Blown Change Rather Than Piecemeal Change**

One definition of a bold idea is one that changes everything at once. Instead of tinkering or fixing things at the margin, we boldly take on the entire system. By “full-blown,” I don’t mean creating an innovation that can be replicated in numerous places; rather, I mean seeking an innovation that fixes the full range of problems we see in the system.

The most visible recent version of this form of bold initiative was systemic change, a reform idea that called for states to align their various policies into a coherent whole. States would make new rules for teacher education, licensure, accreditation, and K-12 standards, curricula, and assessment so that these numerous structures presented schools with a single coherent set of expectations rather than a crazy-quilt of incompatible expectations. Many states gave this idea serious consideration in the late 1990s, but the task was more complex than anticipated and even those with good intentions still produced systems with inconsistent rules (see e.g., Guskey & Oldham, 1997).

Though the phrase systemic usually refers to state policies, there is also a “systemic” issue in every teacher’s classroom and in every teacher education program. In a classroom, for instance, systemic change would be more than merely a better seating arrangement or a better textbook; it would mean changing the entire instructional system. This is what reformers seek when they try to change traditional teaching into constructivist teaching, for instance. They seek an entirely new approach, one that alters the seating, the discourse, the content, the social norms, the materials, the room arrangement, and even the wall displays. This would constitute a bold change in teaching and anything less than this would be considered tinkering.

In teacher education, full-scale change would mean that we would alter not merely the list of course requirements, the assessment processes, or the sequence of learning experiences, but that we would seek to do all of these things and more, including fixing all the little curricular anomalies in all the content areas and also bringing cooperating teachers into our framework and striving for an intellectually coherent and integrated program in which all the parts fit together and enhance one another.

We have a well-populated history of efforts to make full-scale changes in both teaching and teacher education. Teachers have experienced ungraded classrooms, pull out programs, programmed instruction, discovery learning, and mastery learning, and teacher educators have been through competency-based programs, micro-teaching, masters-level programs, reflective teacher education, clinical supervision, behavioral objectives, performance-based teacher education, professional development schools, and social justice.

These initiatives are bold in the sense that they seek to alter not just one or two aspects of the system, but instead to alter the entire system fundamentally. They are appealing in part because we are all painfully aware of all the flaws in our existing systems. But as a strategy for improvement, full-scale change overlooks the cleverness in the existing system. The existing system has evolved over time, through a long process of iterative compromises and negotiations among competing interests, rules, and constraints. Each aspect of it serves some purpose, meets some needs, addresses someone’s interest. Abandoning the entire system in search of an alternative means abandoning solutions as well as flaws. In fact, the current system probably solves some problems so well that we have forgotten that these problems exist. They will be discovered only if we make full-scale changes.

The alternative to full-scale change is continuous tinkering, an approach that is often too quickly dismissed, as if somehow tinkering is not sufficiently intellectual or as if there is no overarching goal or plan when one is tinkering. But tinkering is a strategy that acknowledges the multitude of constraints and compromises that bold ideas overlook. Tinkering allows us to capitalize on the successful aspects of current practice while still making incremental improvements. It allows us to enjoy the comfort and security of the familiar while also changing it. When Huberman (1992) studied teachers’ careers and sought predictors of professional satisfaction, he found that teachers who tinkered throughout their careers felt more satisfied than those who participated in a major reform. Teachers who steered clear of reforms or other multiple-classroom innovations but who invested consistently with classroom-level experimentation—what Huberman called tinkering—were more satisfied. Conversely, heavy involvement with reforms was a predictor of later disenchantment.
If by “bold ideas” we mean full-scale change rather than tinkering, then bold ideas are likely to fail, for they cannot be designed to accommodate the myriad constituencies, goals, and constraints that are accommodated by current practice.

“Bold” as Fearless Rather Than Hesitant

Another definition of bold has to do with how confidently or aggressively we pursue our ideas. I contrasted my first definition of boldness with tinkering and can contrast this version of boldness with careful and deliberate action, presumably also with a willingness to live with potentially unforeseen consequences. Movie heroes typically act without hesitation or fear, and they typically save the day. But heroes have the advantage of living in a world where both people and events are unilaterally good or bad, where there is always just one hand, and never the other hand, and where they have perfect knowledge of which people are the good guys and which are the bad guys. In their world, the right course of action is self-evident. No need to hesitate.

Anyone who believes that the solution to our problems is self-evident is not seeing the entire picture. Nothing in teacher education or in teaching is self-evident, and this version of boldness requires us to rush fearlessly into a new idea without thought. In fact, this version of bold is the very opposite of the kind of careful and thoughtful approach we need. A bold idea should not be one that disregards potential consequences, but instead one that has been thought through carefully and whose consequences have also been fully anticipated.

“Bold” as a Break From the Past

There is another version of boldness that refers to the unusualness of an idea. An idea that differs radically from the ideas we are accustomed to is considered to be a bold idea. Advocates for this type of boldness suggest that we should abandon everything we already know and have done in favor of a new, unique, or novel approach. This version of boldness implies that boldness itself will yield a better approach simply by virtue of its uniqueness.

This is the entrepreneurial version of boldness. We give freedom to enterprising people who have new ideas and fresh thinking. The results will be exciting. But the argument for fresh ideas loses some appeal when we look at the fate of new businesses. Each year, thousands of entrepreneurs start new businesses. Each is hopeful; each believes he or she has a fresh new idea. Yet, more than a third of new businesses fail within 2 years, and more than two thirds have failed within their first 10 years (Shane, 2008). Nonetheless, each of these ideas seemed like a good idea at the time.

It is a mistake to seek new ideas just for the sake of their newness or to assume that the unusualness of an idea makes it automatically better. In fact, it is more likely that the unusualness of an idea is a portent of potential failure, for such an idea is likely to be overlooking much of what we have learned from our current practice. Every idea has unintended consequences, things that we couldn’t have predicted. The more similar an idea is to the ideas we already have, the more likely that we can anticipate its consequences. The more different it is, the less able we are to actually envision it and the less likely we can envision what will go wrong. Any idea that is so bold as to abandon completely current practice is also likely to create a new set of unintended consequences. And unintended consequences are even more likely when designing a system that must respond to a wide variety of competing interests, constraints, and rules.

Radical departures are intended to correct myriad flaws we see in our current system. But in so doing they also overlook the benefits of current programs. They forget that there are reasons why our programs look the way they do, and they overlook the various and conflicting things we are simultaneously trying to accomplish.

“Bold” as a Committed Movement

Finally, there is a version of boldness that refers to a collective movement, a time in history when a group of people band together to advocate for change. In this case, it is the social movement itself that is bold, though the members of the group believe their goal is also bold in at least one of the senses described previously. This version of boldness depends on emotional commitment, zeal, and energy from group members. Often the group’s zeal stems from a belief that its goal is more important than those it seeks to usurp and from a sense of urgency that we address this new goal. Often people who form new schools feel this sort of commitment and are willing to work long hours to achieve their goal in the belief that they can succeed and can make a difference. Often their work is laudable.

But there are two problems with movements as strategies for improving education. One is that they require such intense commitments that participants often tire of the idea and withdraw so that they can restore their former, more ordinary lives (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). We first saw this phenomenon back in the 1930s when perhaps our first large-scale reform was tried. The Eight-Year Study, named for the years students spend in high school and college, was sponsored by the Progressive Education Association. The project grew from a belief that secondary schools were constrained by college admission requirements and were consequently unable or unwilling to adopt more progressive approaches to teaching. The idea was to encourage more innovation in secondary schools by persuading colleges and universities to admit students based on principals’ recommendations rather than the package of Carnegie units they had completed. By persuading colleges to try this alteration, reformers hoped to encourage more innovation in secondary schools. The project was successful in the sense that students from these schools did as well in college as those from more traditional high schools—in fact, some say they did much better (Bullough & Kridel, 2003)—but it was not successful in the sense of triggering lasting change in schools. Eventually, schools reverted to their prior routines (Aikin, 1942; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Since then we have witnessed numerous school reform movements, many of which capture imaginations and motivate tremendous energy but...
that do not last over time. Eventually, our daily practices must be sustainable within normal work hours (and movements require much more than ordinary people can ultimately invest) and without the need for zealous and inspirational leaders.

Movements may also fail because they often generate counter movements. When literacy educators became enamored with whole language instruction, they eventually triggered a counter movement that advocated more attention to phonics. When math educators became enamored with constructivist approaches to teaching mathematics, they eventually triggered a counter movement that advocated more attention to computational mathematics. As a result, we have experienced literacy wars, math wars, and science wars. Eventually, the curriculum we use will be negotiated to satisfy these competing goals and we will continue as we always have, with a compromise program that fails to satisfy members of either side.

Discussion

I argued previously that regardless of one’s definition, bold ideas are not good ideas. What we need in education are ideas that develop slowly and that build on what we already have, not ideas that develop excitedly or that deviate markedly from current practice. Here I want to make a further argument: Not only are bold ideas likely to fail, but they also are likely to hinder our progress toward real improvements by distracting educators and making it more difficult for them to concentrate. At any given time in education, the intellectual landscape is littered with reform ideas that pull teachers, schools, and larger institutions in multiple directions at once. The number of associations, institutions, government agencies, and volunteers of all kinds who want to solve educational problems has grown so large that teachers are surrounded by a cacophony of helpful voices and a plethora of ideas too numerous to attend to. Instead of strengthening teaching, this multitude of innovations and reforms distracts teachers and students from their central tasks, making it difficult to concentrate, difficult to stay on task, and difficult to sustain a coherent direction. These voices clutter the landscape, disrupting thought and disabling the very kind of thoughtful and deliberate change we need.

Every helpful idea requires teachers to make adjustments. Every time we help teachers, they have to stop thinking about how to wrap their students’ minds around a concept and instead turn their attention toward accommodating the new innovation—the pull out program, zero tolerance policy, assembly, formative assessment policy, quarterlies, lesson study, walk-through, block scheduling plan, team teaching plan, authentic teaching, reciprocal teaching, constructivist teaching program, computer lab, grading policy, parent council, grouping policy, school closing, layoff program, or perhaps National Board Certification. Every change of schedule, from hourly to block scheduling and back to hourly, requires teachers to revise their routines and strategies. Every new policy, from zero tolerance to team teaching, distracts teachers and complicates their task. Instead of thinking about how to engage students with curriculum content, teachers must think about how to revise their procedures, schedules, and strategies to accommodate the newest helpful idea.

Moreover, these improvements often contradict one another. Consider two ideas currently on the table for evaluating teaching practice. On the one hand, we have lesson study, a highly structured event that requires months of collective effort and careful thought. On the other, we have walk-throughs, quick and unstructured events that can be done by one person in under 5 minutes! These ideas seem to make entirely different assumptions about how we can learn about teaching, yet they are both wildly popular right now.

There have always been zealous education reformers, of course, and there is no doubt that we need to find ways to improve both teaching and teacher education. But the number and variety of helpful ideas is now so great that the solutions themselves have become a problem. We need to stop seeking bold, innovative, exciting, or big ideas. Instead of seeking bold ideas, grand ideas, creative ideas, or group commitment, we should be doing just the opposite: studying our practices closely and deliberately, deepening our understanding of the circumstances in which we work, and finding small and sustainable ways to improve.

References


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