Teacher Educators as Mettlesome Mermaids: On Collaborating to Reinvent Teacher Education in a Technocratic Society, 3(12)

Peter P. Grimmett

grimmett@sfu.ca
Professor and Co-Director
Institute for Studies in Teacher Education
Simon Fraser University

Guest editors from Nipissing University
for partnership theme articles
Douglas R. Franks
Mary Ross Hookey
Helen G. Langford

Abstract

In this examination of collaboration in teacher education, I characterize teacher educators as "mermaids," people who not readily fit into the norms of academe yet act on the conviction that they have a place in postsecondary education. I argue that they must pull together with others who share a commitment to teacher education to act as "mettlesome mermaids" in the current context of economic rationalism if they are to redefine what they do in ways that benefit all students. I describe the political context as leading to the penetration of corporate interests into higher education, heightened competition and reduced funding levels, accompanied by increased regulation and intrusion into the practice and autonomy of professionals. I suggest that within this political context-a context in which collaboration has been foregrounded-teacher educators need to act with caution. The challenge they face of finding ways to reconstitute their work to benefit all students requires them both to work with others and grapple with deep-rooted problems associated with collaboration. I contend they must stand against the prevailing conditions of a technocratic society, showing their mettle by focusing collaboration on challenges such as preparing teachers to teach in a culturally diverse world and recruiting into teaching representatives of minority ethnic groups.
Where do the MERMAIDS\(^2\) stand?

Organizing a roomful of wired-up gradeschoolers into two teams, explaining the rudiments of the game, achieving consensus on group identity—all this is no mean accomplishment. But we did it with right good will and were ready to go.

The excitement of the chase had reached a critical mass. I yelled out, "You have to decide now which you are—a GIANT, a WIZARD, or a DWARF!"

While the groups huddled in frenzied, whispered consultation, a tug came on my pant's leg. A small child stands there looking up and asks in a small, concerned voice, "Where do the mermaids stand?"

Where do the mermaids stand?

A long pause. A very long pause. "Where do the Mermaids stand?" says I.

"Yes, you see, I am a Mermaid."

"There are no such things as Mermaids."

"Oh, yes, I am one!"

She did not relate to being a giant, a wizard or a dwarf. She knew her category. Mermaid. And was not about to leave the game and go over and stand against the wall where a loser would stand. She intended to participate, wherever Mermaids fit into the scheme of things. She took it for granted that there was a place for Mermaids and that I would know just where.

Well, where do Mermaids stand? All the "Mermaids"—all those who are different, who do not fit the norm and who do not accept the available boxes and pigeonholes?

Answer that question and you can build a school, a nation, or a world on it.

What was my answer? Every once in a while I say the right thing. "The Mermaid stands right here by the King Of The Sea," says I. (Yes, right here by the King's fool, I thought to myself).

So we stood there hand in hand reviewing the troupes of Wizards and Giants and Dwarves as they roiled by in wild disarray.

It is not true, by the way, that Mermaids do not exist. I know at least one personally. I have held her hand. (Fulghum, 1988, pp. 81-83)

The above story by Robert Fulghum says a lot about teacher educators. I know many Mermaids—people who not readily fit into the norms of academe yet act on the conviction that there is a place for them in postsecondary education. They are not the Giants, Wizards or Dwarves of educational research but they believe they have a meaningful contribution to make to the
education of teachers. They struggle to do their work in institutions besieged by competing agendas. Paradoxically, these mermaid teacher educators are not individualistic; yes, they go against the grain (Cochran-Smith, 1991) but they also see the need to collaborate with different partners in preparing teachers to grapple with the vexing problems and contradictions inherent in today's changing world.

**Thesis**

In this examination of collaboration in teacher education, my thesis is that teacher educators must pull together with others who share an indomitable and robust commitment to the purposes of teacher education to act as "mettlesome mermaids" in the current context of economic rationalism and social re-engineering if they are to redefine what they do in ways that benefit all students.

**Why Collaboration?**

Collaboration attempts to bridge the two different cultures—the two solitudes, one in the schools, and one in the universities (Lieberman, 1988; Sarason, 1992)—that contribute to the education of teachers. Up until recently, schools and universities rarely engaged in meaningful conversation during research (Tikunoff & Ward, 1983) or during the conduct of teacher education (Clift & Say, 1988). Consequently, there has been a clarion call for school-university partnerships (Goodlad, 1988), professional development schools (PDSs) (Holmes Group, 1990), "organic collaboration" (Schlechty & Whitford, 1988), or networks, coalitions, and collaboratives (Lieberman, 1994; McLaughlin, 1994).

However, these calls for collaboration come in a world that is changing rapidly. Elkind (1997) depicts the changes in today's world as a movement away from a modern society toward a postmodern one, from a belief in progress, universalism, and regularity to an emphasis on difference, particularity, and irregularity. This change from modern to postmodern, which began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, coincided with renewed interest in education circles in collaboration. That is because collaboration aims to bring people from different backgounds and contexts together to grapple with the particular details of a project or task in a world that is characterized by irregularity and uncertainty. Thus, Hargreaves (1994) claims that collaboration has come to comprise a "metaparadigm" of educational and organizational change in the postmodern age (p. 244). Indeed, he enunciates that "the principle of collaboration has repeatedly emerged [in his examination of issues in the working lives of teachers] as a productive response to a world in which problems are unpredictable, solutions are unclear, and demands and expectations are intensifying" (p. 245). He goes on to show how collaboration can provide moral support, increased efficiency, improved effectiveness, and reduced overload for educators through opportunities for synchronized time perspectives, situated certainty, political assertiveness, increased capacity for reflection, organizational responsiveness, and opportunities to learn and continuously improve (pp. 245-246).

Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, and Taubman's (1995) summary of the postmodern period acts as a counterpoint to Hargreaves' predication about collaboration. They cite Jameson to suggest that the conditions associated with postmodernism signal the "end of." "These last few years have
been marked by an inverted millenarianism, in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by the sense of the end of this or that" (p. 469). Wideen and Grimmett (1997) build on this premise, posing the possibility of the end of teacher education as we know it. They suggest a number of reasons for this: the lack of support for teacher education; closures and rumours of closures; teacher education as a non-player in school reform; the re-engineering of higher education; the move toward alternative certification; the cumbersome organization of teacher education; the dysfunctional curriculum; the lack of public accountability; and the problematic move to universities. There are a few exceptions, the "wedge of progressive practice" as Wideen (1995) calls it. But the negative perception of teacher preparation is so strong that some governments around the world have begun restructuring the process. This has led to increases in the amount of school experience for preservice teachers, a reduction of supervision by university personnel, a phasing out of concurrent programs, a strengthening of subject discipline knowledge in elementary teachers; and the inclusion of business/industry experiences. This, in turn, has led to the penetration of corporate interests into higher education, heightened competition and reduced funding levels, accompanied by increased regulation and intrusion into the practice and autonomy of professionals (Grimmett, 1995). It is within this political context—a context which may, in Jameson's words, signal "the end of" collaboration—that collaborative practice has been foregrounded in teacher education.

The Need for Caution?

Over the last decade or so, many researchers (e.g., Grimmett & Crehan, 1992; Hargreaves, 1994) have imbued collaboration with a capacity for adroit professional and pedagogical action—almost suggesting that any interaction that breaks the traditional isolation of teachers will contribute in some fashion to the knowledge, skill, judgment, or commitment that individuals bring to their work, and will enhance the collective capacity of groups or institutions. But is this the case? What if the traditional school culture with its norms of "privacy, reticence, and isolationism" (Grimmett & Crehan, 1992) superimposes itself on the collaborative practices that seem to hold such promise? Would this not make the collaboration appear contrived (Hargreaves, 1994)? Indeed it does. But Little (1990, p. 30) goes further to suggest that the traditional conditions of individualism, presentism, and conservatism extant in schools are nourished in part by the very forms of "collaboration" that enthusiasts admire for their ability to penetrate the walls of privacy. Moreover, she concludes that patterns of interaction that support mutual assistance or routine sharing may account more for maintaining a certain level of workforce stability, teacher satisfaction, and a performance "floor" than for encouraging high rates of innovation or high levels of collective commitment to innovative instructional practices. Collaboration, it seems, may not force teachers to question the school's fundamental purposes or to confront the implications of the dominant structure of traditional practices. Consequently, although collaboration is typically justified in terms of student outcomes, the benefits most frequently experienced seem to have more to do with the professionalization of teaching as an occupation than they do with students and their learning, mirroring the USA National Commission on Teaching and America's Future's finding that "most education dollars are spent on staff and activities other than classroom teaching" Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 15).

Could a similar fate befall collaborative practices in teacher education? Or are we still at the stage of imbuing it unproblematically with virtue? True, by working closely with colleagues,
teacher educators can derive instructional range, depth, and flexibility. Little (1987) argues that the structures of collaborative group work enable educators to attempt curricular-instructional innovations that they would probably not have tried on their own. For example, many teacher educators are today undertaking interclass visitation and observation with colleagues, enabling them to study classroom-related issues together. But it is not just the team work that creates the willingness to try new things—it is the joint action that flows from the group's purposes and obligations as they shape the shared task and its outcomes that constitutes the powerful nature of collaboration. Moreover, teacher educators can derive benefits from collaborative work conditions, because the collective scrutiny involved affords them influence and respect among their colleagues through a combination of visibility (planning for teaching and actual classroom instruction is carried out in the presence of other teacher educators), shared responsibility, and widespread interaction. But has collaboration become an emphasis in teacher education precisely at a time when external market forces and the corporate interests of economic rationalism have begun to invade the professional space of teacher education? Is it just possible that collaborative practices have been grafted on to existing school and university cultures with the result that the process of collaboration appears to be contrived and its effects subverted? For example, Hudson-Ross and McWhorter (1994) describe the problems they encountered when they exchanged jobs as high school teacher and teacher educator for one full year. The teacher educator was applauded for her move to the classroom but the classroom teacher was derided by her school colleagues for "getting a year off" and by her university colleagues for being too "abrasive." Moreover, Million and Vare (1994) describe the all too common misconception of university-school collaboration as offering a traditional course at a field site as professional development for school colleagues. Is this a simple but unfortunate intrusion of traditional organizational culture or are we witnessing the beginning of the end of collaboration in teacher education? Has collaboration in teacher education become a postmodern similacrum—"the identical copy for which no original ever existed" in a culture where "image has become the final form of commodity reification" (Jameson, 1991, p. 18)? Have we created an imagistic representation that will cease to exist the moment we stop talking about it? When collaboration is imagistic, I welcome its demise. But I wish to go beyond the postmodern, neo-Nietzschean collapse of meaning that creates the vacuum voraciously grasped by market-driven consumerism to explore a challenge facing teacher educators.

The Challenge

We teacher educators must find ways of reconstituting our work that benefit all students. But we have to do it in an increasingly technocratic world. The challenge is to affirm difference and diversity, and use dialogue to construct teaching and learning in non-dualistic, complex ways. This will involve us in continually renegotiating the boundaries of our academic work and reinventing what it means to teach as we struggle with the external pressures of economic rationalism and social re-engineering. But we cannot do it alone. We must collaborate. But, in collaborating, we must also get beyond an image to grapple with some very real and deep-rooted problems.

These problems arise from the political context surrounding teacher education. This context is becoming increasingly stifling such that any attempt at collaboration is likely to be so contested that the raison d’être of teacher education could get changed or lost in the machinations that
masquerade as public debate informing education policy. We teacher educators must exercise caution to avoid becoming entrapped in a kind of mephistophelean Micawberism, a devil's bargain in which we, like the Dickensian character of Mr. Micawber, trust somewhat naively that something good will always turn up. Rather, like mermaids we must show our mettle by focusing the energy and power of collaboration on the pressing and promising challenges facing teacher education, such as preparing teachers to teach in a culturally diverse world and recruiting into teaching representatives of minority ethnic groups. To do so, however, is to stand against the power structure and prevailing conditions of a technocratic society.

**Mercantilist Miasma and Mellifluous Machination**

One of the features of the postmodern age has been a preoccupation in economic thought and action with "flexible accumulation" (Harvey, 1989, p. 147) which, in turn, has led to a resurgence of interest in a system of economics that confuses the acquisition of money with the creation of wealth, i.e., mercantilism. Mercantilism was an economic system followed by England, France and other trading nations from the 1500s to the late 1700s. Under this system, a nation's government strictly regulated economic affairs to enrich its treasury, especially by ensuring that exports exceeded imports. It was based on two beliefs. First, mercantilism judged a nation's wealth by its stock of gold and silver (in today's terms, the accumulation of capital) rather than by its standards of living or other measures. Second, mercantilists believed that the world had a limited supply of wealth (capital), and so one country (or sector) could grow rich only at the expense of another. Accordingly, many nations sought overseas colonies which served as markets for exports and sources of raw materials. Except for the mercantilist practice of protectionist tariffs against imports, today's post-fordist globalization, and the laissez faire rhetoric in which it is embedded, represents a similar form of economic colonization that seeks out not only export markets and raw material sources but also, and more significantly, sources of cheap human labour and production. Jameson (1991) has characterized this as "the cultural logic of late capitalism." This cultural logic had its re-birth in the ascending and now dominant neoconservative, New Right political stance, heralded by the Reagan-Thatcher era, which argues for:

a. a reduction in the role of the state, particularly with regard to social services, redistribution of income, and equity initiatives;

b. a reduction in government deficits and debt; and

c. a reliance on market mechanisms and competition to make public services more efficient through privatization or by bringing greater competition into the public sphere. (Hart & Livingstone, 1998, p. 2)

A powerful tactic of the New Right has been the use of disinformation to manufacture crises of confidence through myths, fraud, and outright attack (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). The Ontario Minister of Education, John Snobelen, was even captured on videotape "saying he would invent a crisis to whip up support for overhauling the system" (Brennan, 1995, p. A3). In England and Wales the status, development and recognition of teacher education has suffered immense harm from such disinformation. Having annexed words like "excellence," "quality," "standards," "choice," etc., to their cause and characterizing education theorists as "remote and ineffectual"
and "trendy" (Knight, 1990, p. 91), the New Right in Britain succeeded in creating a "discourse of derision" (Ball, 1990) to establish the view that teacher education was in crisis.

The events in England provide a forbidding picture of what happens when governments use brute political power to impose radical changes. Pimm and Selinger (1995) describe how government restructuring commodified schooling and teacher education in England and Wales. They show that less government in the form of privatization, heightened competition and reduced funding levels actually produced more government in the sense of increased regulation and intrusion into the practice and autonomy of professionals. Gilroy (1992) characterizes the British government's intervention as "the political rape" of teacher education. The point here is that such restructuring encourages the penetration of corporate interests into education, based on the myth that business people are capable of solving a variety of problems from the management of publicly-funded hospitals to deciding the curriculum for different levels of schooling. Accordingly, the invitation for schools and teacher education institutions to enter into partnerships with business in this context is highly problematic since collaboration under these conditions would only serve to reinforce their position of powerlessness.

But the miasma is not always so pungent. Sometimes it is given a mellifluent tone designed to conceal its ideological intent. Such machination can initially seem attractive, if not specious. It could even succeed in making government supported market-driven initiatives and directives much more palatable to teacher educators, tantamount to an exercise in political control (Humes, 1994). Consider the following illustration of collaboration at the school level: partnerships with business, so the supporters say, can "foster school-community cooperation, provide incentives for students, supplement curriculum and staff, and obtain equipment" (Clark, 1992, p. 2).

According to one recent survey in the States, at least 1,200 partnerships have been established (Wilbur & Lambert, 1991). Contrast this with the view expressed in Fortune magazine: businesses see themselves in the new economy as "taking the lead in a long-term revolution to save public education" (Morrison, 1990, p. 8) with "companies such as IBM, Exxon, Coca-Cola, RJR Nabisco, and Citicorp [having] mounted a virtual crusade to save the public schools" (Dumaine, 1990, p. 12). Why do they do this? According to Lankard (1995), it is so that their corporate image is enhanced, so that they obtain enhanced visibility in the community, and can fashion the way in which citizens are trained as future employees and consumers. More to the point, many businesses and advertisers view children as a uniquely profitable three-in-one market: as buyers themselves, as influencers of their parent's purchases, and as future adult consumers (Aidman, 1995).

Is it any different if the partnership is between higher education and business? I suspect not! In the very political environment in which the Minister of Education was caught in flagrante delicto talking about whipping up a crisis to justify harsh funding cuts, we have the Council of Ontario Universities (1996) proposing "partnerships with private companies and the market pricing of postgraduate and professional programs. . . to deal with the altered educational climate, while maintaining the educational quality and developing new sources of revenue." Coming to terms with political realities is one thing; offering uncritical, supine acquiescence is another. We teacher educators need to recognize that, in conditions of a mercantilist miasma, "real power over the form of content of teacher education still lies with [the dominant power group, i.e., the government]" (Humes, p. 54) and invitations to engage in "consultation" frequently serve as a
sometimes subtle, sometimes not so subtle, mechanism of hierarchical control over professional jurisdiction.

Whereas this state of affairs is typically present in England, Australia, and some of the States, it is not yet the case in Canada. However, the practice of collaboration in Canadian teacher education is still problematic. It is more like a mephistophelean Micawberism than it is a practice of significant power and impact.

**Mephistophelean Micawberism**

One of the images of collaboration we have constructed in Canada has emerged from the debate about how (in academic subject matter, in pedagogy, or a combination of both) and where (on campus, in the field, or a combination of both) teachers should be prepared. This debate has not been confined to Canada but has produced its fair share of conflict in North America, Britain, and around the world. The political press of the New Right has typically led to a reactionary stance emphasizing centralized policy making and control of resources, a concern with the delivery of subject-centered core knowledge and skills and an accompanying preoccupation with external assessment of outcomes relative to national standards, and ultimately a reiteration of the teacher's role as "curriculum-deliverer." Opponents have issued a contrasting call to reconceptualize teacher education around student-centred places of learning, based on a view of knowledge as being humanly constructed in social settings. Here, learning requires the active participation of the learner, taps into individual and social processes, assumes students to be constructors (as well as recipients) of knowledge, and ultimately views teachers as curriculum makers. These two broad commitments have fueled the debate about how and where teacher education should take place.

Fenstermacher (1992) posits that teacher education is most appropriately located in higher education. However, he also implies that traditional approaches to university-based teacher education have somehow lost their way. I see university faculties of education as having a critical role to play in the education of teachers but argue that such a role will only materialize when they "rediscover their mission as professional schools, built around the moral and ethical responsibilities of teaching and preparing to teach and all the scholarly and service activities that would be expected to support, nurture and sustain this central purpose" (Soder & Sirotkin, 1990, p. 400).

Can faculties of education do this? With great difficulty, because they are caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, teacher education has become a less important piece in their operation. Labaree (1992) documents in a historical analysis how teacher education is no longer the centre-piece in faculties of education. It is forced to compete with a wide range of other programs whose prestige is frequently greater. One of the most intriguing features of the original Holmes Group is that it consisted of a group of deans from research university-based colleges of education who were arguing for the centrality of teacher education within their own institutions. While the context in Canada is different, Sheehan and Fullan (1995) acknowledge that the location of teacher education in universities has proved problematic because of the emphasis in these settings on theory and research at the expense of practice and the difficulties that programs
have in coming to grips with the prevalent social issues (e.g., cultural diversity, multiculturalism, etc.) of the day.

On the other hand, without teacher education, faculties of education would cease to exist. Goodlad (1990) notes that public policy makers and other faculties and administrators on university campuses show little interest in faculties of education, save for their function as preparers of teachers. Moreover, Fenstermacher (1992) suggests that there would be little public lament if alternative routes to teacher certification became the predominant, if not exclusive, form of entry into teaching and faculties of education eventually ceased to exist.

Thus, the current state of teacher education can be characterized either as an attempt to change teacher preparation that is caught up in the agenda of saving faculties of education, or as a struggle to change the priorities of faculties of education as a way of saving teacher preparation. Whatever the motivation, much reform in Canada came about in the late 1980s and early 1990s because of a perception that there was both an urgency for and a window of opportunity to change teacher education programs (Fullan, Connelly, & Watson, 1987). Many attempts at change were influenced by the Holmes Group (1986) which argued for the separation of subject disciplinary content from pedagogical processes. That is, disciplinary content was to be taught in the faculties of arts and science and pedagogical processes taught in the professional studies component of teacher education in faculties of education. Thus, this image of collaboration-a kind of sharing the spoils, you do academics, we do pedagogy-became dominant in our thinking about teacher education in Canada. Not surprisingly, many programs currently subscribe to this particular construction of reality, implicitly believing it will bring about improvement in teacher education. Although this looks like a form of collaboration within the university, I contend that it is analogous to an unconsummated marriage-the partners live and work in isolation instead of continually coming together in the kind of discursive intercourse that negotiates the dilemmas of curriculum differences and difficulties. I also see it as a "devil's bargain" that is politically expedient to campus-based faculties-it bolsters undergraduate student numbers in the faculties of arts and science in return for acceptance of the existence of a faculty of education-but it does little to improve teacher preparation and may, in fact, even work against it.

I am not unaware of the implications of what an alternative approach to collaboration, such as interdisciplinary team teaching-an arrangement whereby professors from the different faculties of arts, science, and education plan and teach courses together in order to give prospective teachers opportunities to see and make connections between disciplinary subject matter and related pedagogy (see Grimmett, 1998 for more detail on this)-might hold for the typical university faculty and departmental structure. Because departments are characteristically organized along subject discipline lines, the effects in many institutional contexts would be dramatic, if not drastic. The counter argument-that one must take account of the existing culture of the institution-is one that I have used myself to demonstrate the power of a culture of collegiality in enabling teachers' professional development (see Grimmett & Crehan, 1992). However, I also pointed out that cultures can just as easily become stifling as they can be enabling. My purpose here, then, is to go beyond Sheehan and Fullan's (1995) contention that the location of teacher education in Canadian universities has been problematic to pose a fundamental question about what it is actually possible to collaborate on in teacher education. My point is that it is not the move to universities from normal schools that has proved
problematic but the existing culture and structure of research-based universities in which teacher education programs have been lodged that makes collaboration difficult and, in some instances, unworkable. My contention is that it is highly problematic when we accept that culture and structure as taken-for-granted aspects of higher education-based teacher preparation. Thus, if collaborative practices are to become a reality in teacher education, there is a need for a critical examination of university culture and structure, not to remove teacher education from the university setting but to provoke debate about how collaborative practices can be conceptualized and enacted.

The above Holmes-induced image of collaboration in many Canadian university teacher education settings is a kind of mephistophelean Micawberism, a devil's bargain in which teacher educators naively trust that something good will turn up from the collaborative arrangement negotiated with the faculties of arts and science. But it will not when the arrangement perpetuates what Tom (1995) calls horizontal (as distinct from vertical) staffing; that is, faculty members are committed to their own courses, not to the teacher education program per se or to a cohort of preservice teachers. Thus, despite the good intentions of the program designers and the Micawber-like nature of teacher educators who have been subject to constant pressure and harping criticism, this approach tends to support the reactionary side of the current conflict. In most conventional university-based programs, the emphasis that learning requires the active participation of the learner, etc., seems to get disastrously lost. Even in those programs that "go against the grain," there is university administration pressure to revert to an academic-rationalist curriculum in teacher education. This is happening because universities are beginning to feel the pressure of external criticism and dissatisfaction that was previously reserved for faculties of education. And, as Crowson and Boyd (1994) point out so trenchantly, institutions under environmental pressure tend to protect their "core" and may even become more fragmented under pressure to change. Thus, universities and faculties of education have tended to respond to this external pressure by emphasizing in deed that which makes them distinctive, i.e., research and publication, at the expense of an emphasis on practice and pedagogical collaboration. True, they have developed awards for teaching and talked supportively about commitment to teacher education and collaboration; but, unwittingly or insidiously, the bar for tenure and promotion has been getting higher-evidence of the protected core-and talk about commitment to collaborative practice has begun to sound like mellifluent machination, leaving teacher education more fragmented than before and teacher educators given to a mephistophelean Micawberism. While this state of affairs is plausible for faculties of arts and science, I find it perplexing for faculties of education. It suggests that these faculties might have forgotten which "core" they need to protect, i.e., teacher education. And if that core goes, as I have suggested elsewhere that it could (Grimmett, 1997), then I would posit that faculties of education will cease to exist.

Is there a way out? I believe there is, provided that teacher educators are prepared to act in ways that show the mettle they are made of. But this would require a lot of courage, commitment, perseverance, and indefatigable energy. It would be a hard journey, taking the road less travelled (Barnard, Muthwa-Kuehn, & Grimmett, 1997) to collaborate with other similarly committed professionals to grapple with the pressing and troublesome challenges facing teacher education. It would require teacher educators to act as mettlesome mermaids.
**Mettlesome Mermaids**

Mettlesome mermaids develop the capacity to work productively within a politically difficult context by reconstituting teacher education in ways that promote equity and justice for learners. By acting in this way, mettlesome mermaids run the risk of being caricatured by those in power as "meddlesome" because of their sedulous commitment to learners and learning in an ethnically diverse context. But they are typically at ease going against the grain of mainstream ideology; they continually renegotiate the boundaries of academic work by reinventing what it means to teach and to learn to teach.

How do they do this? Like Foucault, they recognize the fluid and dynamic nature of power, seeing themselves not just as objects or targets of power but, most importantly, as vital elements in its articulation and exercise:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target. They are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (Foucault, cited in Luke & Gore, 1992, p. 58.)

Mettlesome mermaid teacher educators, then, are not daunted by political machinations designed to oppress them but are fired by a concern to address the needs of learners. The discrepancy between the demand for teachers of ethnic diversity, etc., and their supply and access into teacher education serves as an example of how their passion could show. The research evidence is clear that there is a huge discrepancy between the demographic representation of students in schools and those candidates entering into teacher preparation programs (Beynon & Toohey, 1995). Mettlesome mermaids would take this evidence seriously, but also realize they cannot address such a pressing challenge alone. Thus, they would commit themselves to recruit into teaching people of colour and of minorities, and to collaborate with others concerned with this problem by sharing information, resources, and responsibilities. Such collaboration could spark both the courage to try something different and the creativity to develop new strategies and initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining minority teachers. Collaboration and support is necessary and vital to produce the courage to go against the status quo, to recruit students other than culturally-constructed "high-ability" candidates, students from diverse backgrounds who may not score high on particular kinds of academic measures but who could become positive role models, effective instructors, and long-term teachers (Sears, Marshall, & Otis-Wilborn, 1994). This is no easy challenge! Groups of colleagues need to brainstorm ways in which such a challenge can even be contemplated, let alone begun in the current litigious environment in which courts tend more readily to accept as criterial referents arbitrary mathematical symbols than they do reasoned professional judgement. It would, as Middleton (1990) points out, require networking and partnerships between local school districts, provincial associations, universities, and community groups to enhance minority enrollment in teacher education.
A concomitant important challenge facing teacher educators in the postmodern era is to identify the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that all teachers need to teach all students in a culturally diverse classroom (Bell & Munn, 1996). Appropriate collaboration between and among the various stakeholder groups is needed to prepare teachers for cultural diversity. This would entail the alignment of graduate study with undergraduate teacher preparation, beginning teacher induction, and the continuing education of teachers in schools (King-Sears, 1995). One possible experimental strategy proposed by Allen (1993) involves immersing future teachers into a culture different from their own to develop a new appreciation and awareness of students as individuals, and an understanding of the importance of diversity to a quality learning environment. Such situations, however, would require the careful and close involvement of sensitive teacher educators to ensure that preservice teachers use this experience to understand cultural diversity and its implications for learning rather than the experience becoming a basis for reinforcing any preexisting ethnocentric values. Attempting placements like these would not be straightforward. But this is precisely the kind of situation in which we must not allow organizational considerations to dictate what is possible. That is a sure-fire way of keeping the status quo. We must find creative ways to address the logistical problems that such an arrangement would precipitate and I firmly believe that the creativity and courage needed to implement such a strategy could only flow from the joint action and power of collaboration.

Collaboration in teacher education could also involve grappling with colleagues in how to represent subject-matter knowledge pedagogically through collaborative program planning and team teaching and also through facilitating classroom action research among preservice teachers. The proposed academic collaboration among professors would be based on a concern to nurture undergraduate teacher education candidates in a way in which the configuration of roles and ideas is continually renegotiated, as teacher educators involve themselves in building a culture of inquiry, exposing preservice teachers to alternative views and practices, and providing organizational support for teacher research groups (Grimmett, 1996). None of this can happen, however, without some mettlesome collaborative lobby at the policy level for human, technical, and financial support for the necessary changes in structure at the university, e.g., in the reward system, etc., that would permit teacher education to meet the "labour-intensive, time-consuming, and frustrating" (Dworet, 1992) challenges I have described. Such changes need to be in place if professors are not to experience a loss of academic identity and integrity. Asymmetrical power relationships between colleagues only lead to intense discussions of territoriality, hierarchy, status, and control, not to collaboration. Nor will collaboration take place between institutions if participants come to the process with conflicting worldviews that precipitate culture clashes between the different agencies. As Hatch (1998) shows in his study of the collaboration of the Atlas Communities Project-involving the Coalition of Essential Schools, Education Development Center, Harvard Project Zero, and the School Development Program-differences in participants' theories of action contributed to significant disagreements over a number of key issues related to the process of change, the nature of the curriculum, and the shape of personal and organizational development. As a result, despite considerable funding, broad initial agreements, and good relationships at the highest levels, it was extremely difficult to make decisions and carry work out in a collaborative and efficient manner. Even professional development schools (PDSs) are not immune to the difficulties inherent in collaborative practice (Petrie, 1995; Metcalf-Turner & Fischetti, 1996) and, because they are context-bound and relatively few in number, they may not always be representative of the cultural diversity in society with which teacher education needs
to connect. Thus, to be a mermaid teacher educator implies a particular set of commitments: to learners and the process of learning; to cultural diversity; to the co-construction of knowledge; to problematizing power relations; and to issues of equity and social justice. The question I am left with is whether the presence of these very clear and definite parameters—without which collaboration, it seems to me, becomes highly unworkable—while they render collaboration possible, actually undermine its raison d’être.

Conclusion

Where do the MERMAIDS stand? Right here next to the King of the Sea, the policy makers and power brokers (but next to, not alongside) going against the tide of mainstream ideology; continually renegotiating the boundaries of academic work by reinventing what it means to teach, as they attempt to make practical what Fullan (1997) calls "the emotion of hope" by unstitching economic rationalism and ideological social re-engineering; trying something different, creatively developing new strategies and initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining minority teachers and at preparing teachers for cultural diversity; grappling with colleagues in how to represent subject-matter knowledge pedagogically through collaborative program planning and team teaching and also through facilitating classroom action research; in sum, collaborating in the challenge to recreate teacher preparation as a vital place of learning for today's postmodern society. But it's not unproblematic. Mettlesome mermaid teacher educators must first reconstitute technocratic policy in ways that benefit all learners, refuse to be content with a form of mephistophelean Micawberism, and show their mettle in addressing the pressing challenges facing teacher education in a culturally diverse world. Yes, it's okay to be a MERMAID, calling sailor educators away from the systemic dry land of academic convention back to their first love—exploring within the contested and complex social context of today the tempestuous, heaving sea of teaching and learning. And, just as their bodies show a joining of unfamiliar parts in unexpected ways, so these mermaids instinctively know what collaboration is. But, remember also that mermaids are a myth. They don't exist! At least, that's what we'll be told, and made to feel!

Endnotes

1 This article is based on work undertaken in a research program funded to me by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Grant #410-95-1071). I gratefully acknowledge that this work could not have been carried out without this funding. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the policy, position, or endorsement of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

2 The use of the term "mermaids" to depict teacher educators follows the characterization in Robert Fulghum's story "Where do the Mermaids stand?" Mermaids, women or men of the sea with fish tails instead of legs, are seen as those people who go against the pervasive categories and norms of the dominant societal ideology; thus no sexist connotation is intended. However, the term more typically denotes women than men, and this female typification is used symbolically to suggest that teacher educators, like mermaids, are dependent on the King of the Sea, i.e., policy makers and education power brokers, for their authority and position. I am very
grateful to Thoko Muthwa-Kuehn and Kathleen Barnard for pointing out this important distinction.

3Sometimes referred to as the "Christian Right" in the media, it is, as Fackre (1982) points out, an alternative form of secular humanism that has piously coopted spiritual language and values through highly selective use and interpretation of biblical text to reinforce "partisan political judgments and culture-bound mores" (p. 105) in an anthropocentric manner. In other words, apart from the rhetoric, there is nothing Christian about the neoconservative movement.

4 See Dittmer and Fischetti (1995) for a trenchant description of what happens when teacher educators try to practise what they teach.

5 See Young and Bartel (1996) for a case study of lessons learned about programmatic change in teacher education within the culture of the university.

References


**Authorship Information**

**Peter P. Grimmett**  
Professor and Co-Director  
Institute for Studies in Teacher Education  
Faculty of Education  
Simon Fraser University  
Burnaby, BC, V5A 1E6  
Voice: (604) 291-4937  
FAX: (604) 291-3203  
*E-Mail: grimmett@sfu.ca*