Many Faces of Policy Advocacy: Reclaiming Teacher Educators’ Voice, Knowledge, and Authority in the Struggle for Equity and Justice

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In 2015, at a professional development event organized by AERA’s Division K, Professor Lin Goodwin shared, “Teacher education is under attack, under assault. And the teacher education community is not at the table to discuss how teacher education should be reformed. We need to do a better job about being involved in policy debates. If we don’t do something and soon, in a few years’ time there will be no university-based teacher education left.” That statement resonated deeply with me. It shaped much of my research in my efforts to better understand the assault and figure out what WE – the teacher education community – can do better in response to this assault.

I explored the assault on teacher education in my book that recently came out. Using the framework of political theater, I analyzed the farcical disconnect between reformers’ promises of increased educational quality and their efforts to deprofessionalize teachers and dismantle university-based teacher education (Aydarova, 2019). Reformers who are not affiliated with teacher education in any meaningful way publicly shared messages that did not match what they said privately. The ultimate goal of their policy pursuits was not just changed systems but changed societies full of acquiescent and compliant workers, rather than thoughtful and engaged
citizens. I finished my book with a call to action, urging teacher educators to engage policymakers in public dialogue over the direction of reform.

That call to action posed a dilemma for me – who do you actually engage in a dialogue over teacher education policies? When I began researching the changes in the U.S. teacher education policy, it became increasingly clear that by the time a bill reaches a legislator’s desk, it has been worked on by many different groups. In 2016, I started collecting data on various organizations that have produced policy proposals for teacher education reforms or issued research briefs on teacher education – groups that are often called “reformers.” In educational policy, these groups are referred to as intermediary organizations and include non-profit or for-profit organizations, think-tanks, and advocacy groups. Scott and Jabbar (2014) pointed out that these groups are connected to the work of venture philanthropists like spokes to a hub in a wheel. Working in tandem, they set education reforms in motion. Even though their role is not to produce legislation or carry out reforms, Janelle Scott and her colleagues (2017, p. 26) noted that intermediary organizations have become de facto policymakers as “federal, state, and local policymakers are granting them both authority and financial resources to carry out policy agendas.” In my talk today, however, I will use Diane Ravitch’s term for these groups – “disruptors.” She explains that disruptors “banked on a strategy of testing, competition, and punishment, which turned out to be ineffective and harmful” (Ravitch, 2020). In a similar vein, Suzanne Wilson (2014, p. 185) described how in pursuit of “disruptive entrepreneurial tradition,” these new groups seek to “‘destruct,’” so that new and better teacher preparation (the one that is less likely to be based in a university setting) can arise from the rubble.”

Who are some of the disruptors in teacher education? My database of organizations trying to influence teacher education currently comprises close to 100 groups and the National
Council on Teacher Quality, The New Teacher Project rebranded as TNTP, the Council of Chief State School Officers, Deans for Impact, Bellwether Education Partners, Center for American Progress, and many others. I refer to them as disruptors because despite various claims about the good that these groups are pursuing their agendas and methods of reaching those agendas have become anti-democratic, destructive, and in many cases self-serving.

As early as 2002, the Fordham Foundation – one of the early champions of alternative routes into teaching – celebrated that disruptors managed to “win the war of ideas” (Fordham Foundation, 2002). Many changes in the field are a testament to disruptors’ victories – higher accountability requirements for teacher education, a push for increased selectivity for admission into programs, continued attempts to link K-12 students’ test scores to the programs that prepared teachers, greater emphasis on performance assessments, such as edTPA, as well as support for residency programs, grow-your-own teachers programs, and other alternative routes. Even if intermediary organizations were not the original designers of some of these policies – for example, edTPA emerged out of many years of Linda Darling-Hammond’s work – these groups have picked up and amplified policy proposals that are now affecting university-based programs. These groups have also come to define the overall story of what teacher education is about. In my research, I have been trying to understand how they manage to spread their ideas, so that these ideas become common sense among policymakers and the public. In other words, I want to know how disruptors manage “to win the war of ideas.”

The purpose of my talk today is to share what I learned about disruptors’ policy advocacy in order to draw out potential lessons for teacher educators. If disruptors have managed to win the war of ideas, what can we learn from their example? As I present my research findings, I will describe seven of disruptors’ policy advocacy activities, provide an example or two, and then I
will draw out a lesson for teacher education which I will highlight with this little light bulb. I do want to acknowledge that many teacher educators are already engaged in a lot of powerful and important work in the policy world. In a study that I am currently conducting together with Professor Nancy Dana and James Rigney from the University of Florida, we have tremendously enjoyed learning from folks who are giving testimonies, writing letters, and drafting alternative bills. Building on that work, I would like to offer thoughts on how we could reclaim our voice, knowledge, and authority by expanding how we think about what counts as policy advocacy and reimagining what we can do as individual teacher educators as well as members of professional organizations.

There are seven policy advocacy activities that disruptors engage in to “win the war of ideas.”

1. **Disruptors pursue a shared vision.**

   Despite political differences, disruptors are driven by a shared vision and shared convictions. Whether they claim to be bipartisan, nonpartisan, progressive, or conservative, what brings them together is a pursuit of neoliberal technocracy. What do I mean by that? Commitments to neoliberalism become evident in convictions that that markets can fix failing social institutions, that the problems of public education can be solved by applying strategies and techniques developed by the private sector, and that policies should be oriented towards satisfying individual consumers. All of this happens without a critical understanding that, as David Labaree (2018) writes, treating education as a private good and those who pursue education as customers undermines the fabric of society, increases inequality, and threatens the future of democracy.
Technocracy operates on the assumption that social problems have technical solutions and that experts can construct those solutions better than professionals or the public (Centeno, 1993; Fischer 1990). Technocratic principles become most evident in conversations that deploy the language of efficiency, effectiveness, and data-driven decision-making. They also become evident in how disruptors define the problems in US education – as a lack of access to effective teachers. Marylin Cochran-Smith and colleagues (2018) describe disruptors’ definitions as “thin equity” – focusing on access to opportunity without providing adequate resources and supports to ensure success and thriving. The definition of the problem then leads to simplistic solutions – like holding teacher education programs accountable as a way to improve K-12 students’ educational outcomes. This is a dangerous path because technical solutions like high-stakes testing and punitive accountability will not address growing inequality and social segregation in the U.S. that have more impact on students’ educational outcomes than effective teachers ever would. As Noble Prize winning economists Paul Krugman (2012) and Joseph Stiglitz (2012) point out, we need wide-scale social and economic reform that will curb excesses at the top and invest into public goods, such as education. What these calls do is they create an illusion of change while at the same time protecting the status quo of deeply unequal and unjust systems that benefit those who have already amassed massive fortunes.

If disruptors pursue a shared neoliberal technocratic vision disguised under the language of equity and justice, what can we do as teacher educators? We need to set aside all the minutae that divide us and cultivate a shared vision amongst ourselves that prioritizes the pursuit of strong equity, justice, and democracy in our work. We need to come together around a vision for education writ large as a public good and as a human right, rather than a consumer good. The work of Education Deans for Equity and Justice exemplifies this pursuit. This is an organization
that brought together 250 deans of education across the country. Over the span of two years, they have been advocating for interrupting inequities and injustices in education and in the society at large. Their mission statement states: “Education Deans for Justice and Equity (EDJE) is a nationwide alliance of education deans that advances equity and justice in education by speaking and acting collectively and in solidarity with communities regarding policies, reform proposals, and public debates.” As Kathy Schultz – one of the founding deans – explained, their “outward facing work has mainly been in the form of public statements and articles that we have published with the National Education Policy Center (NEPC) and in the Answer Sheet of the Washington Post, as well as internal work, using a Framework for Justice and Equity developed by the group as a way of closely examining and transforming the practices of schools of education through a justice and equity lens. The framework helps member deans examine everything from the practices that support (and don’t support) diversifying faculty and staff to budgeting and strategic planning processes.”

If you are already affiliated with them, I salute you! If you are not familiar with their work, I would strongly encourage you to look into it and join them in their efforts to cultivate a shared vision of equity and justice in education.

2. Disruptors Actively Participate in Policy-Making Processes

Intermediary organizations have varied roles, but making policies and drafting legislation might not be what we normally associate with those roles. Historically, these organizations emerged as an alternative to state voice. While lobbying is explicitly prohibited for many of these groups because of their non-profit status, they still find a way to influence how reforms are conceptualized or implemented. Whether by drafting model legislation or by designing policy
tools, reformers take an active role in policy-making processes as generators of ideas and actual proposals.

Let’s take a close look at the Excellence in Education Foundation started by Jeb Bush. This foundation is run with the support of major donors, such as Gates, Walton, Haslam Foundations, Pearson, and many others. ExcelInEd has created a playbook for reform with legislators and policymakers as the primary audience that it has made publicly available on its website. “Teacher Supports” is among the first proposals in the playbook, with statistics on declining enrolments in teacher education and teacher shortages in high-needs areas. “Weak or outdated teacher preparation programs” are included in the list of the reasons for these problems. What solutions does ExcelInEd offer? Increase alternative routes and provide professional development opportunities offered by nonprofit and for-profit entities – meaning disruptors promote services offered by other disruptors to fix problems in public education. By the way, among the topics that professional development should address is the science of reading – a pet peeve of Kate Walsh from the National Council of Teacher Quality since at least 2006 when NCTQ published its report “What Ed Schools Aren’t Teaching About Reading.” Mercedes Schneider described how ExcelInEd supports like-minded candidates for office. When those candidates are elected, the organization offers them model legislation to implement or connects them with other disruptors – such as NCTQ – to provide them with the language they could use in drafting their bills.

Disruptors’ participation in policy-making processes can be more subtle and indirect when they influence policy-making through the use of policy tools they create and circulate. One such tool that some of you might be familiar with is the Key Effectiveness Indicators Framework (Teacher Preparation Analytics, 2016) – a framework designed to guide the construction of
teacher preparation accountability systems. The push for this proposal came from the Center for American Progress that in 2010 invited Ed Crowe (who was the inaugural directors of Title II programs under the Higher Education Act) to provide an analysis of teacher preparation accountability in the U.S. When Ed Crowe gave a public presentation hosted by the Center for American Progress, Department of Education staff used his proposal as a springboard for conversations about federal regulations for teacher preparation. In 2013, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation commissioned Ed Crowe and his colleagues from Teacher Preparation Analytics to design a framework for holding teacher preparation accountable for the results. The Key Effectiveness Indicators framework that TPA designed was picked up by the Council of Chief State School Officers for implementation with the Network for Transforming Educator Preparation that they started in 2013 as well. Through that network, KEI was presented to chief state school officers from the participating states as a useful tool for evaluating existing teacher education accountability systems or developing new ones. So, Teacher Preparation Analytics – a for-profit entity focused on teacher education reform – managed to influence policy-making by providing a policy tool that has since influenced teacher preparation accountability structures in Louisiana, Delaware, Massachusetts, and even Illinois that was not selected to participate in the Network for Transforming Educator Preparation.

Now, what can we do to participate in policymaking processes? There are several possibilities here. On the one hand, we can respond to proposals at the state or federal level by providing testimony or submitting comment through the Federal Register when the Department of Education posts new proposals. We can check out the hearings of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee at the Senate, especially the ones that pertain to educator preparation. We can write letters in support or in opposition to the points that are being brought
forward by experts that are invited to serve on the witness stand. We can contact senators and representatives from our own states urging them to adopt legislation that will focus on advancing the public good rather than punitive accountability or market expansion.

But we cannot always only stay on the defensive. We can and should look for ways to offer alternatives. Ken Zeichner’s vision for Teacher Preparation 3.0 – the model of teacher education based on commitment to democratic values, equity, and community-based work (Kretchmar & Zeichner, 2016) could easily become translated into the Playbook that the field can advocate for. Assessments of equity dispositions or cultural responsiveness (Powell, Cantrell, Malo-Juvera, & Correll, 2016) would be far more valuable in evaluating candidates’ readiness or their actual performance in the classroom rather than any other policy tool that disrupters propose.

I would add that one more way in which we can participate in policymaking is by shedding light on the sources of reform proposals and on demanding accountability for reformers and legislators they work with. Often intermediary organizations manage to score victories because much of what they do happens in the shadows – as Kathleen deMarrais notes, their activities remain invisible for the public (deMarrais, Brewer, Atkinson, Herron, & Lewis, 2019). When someone sheds light on what they are doing, these organizations react, retreat, or change their course of action. One prominent teacher educator shared with us a story of how he sent his research paper exposing policy activities of a prominent intermediary organization to that organization. The leadership read the paper and discussed it. Then the organization changed its course and scaled down its efforts to influence teacher education policy. You might have been in a state when on the days when you testify against edTPA, cohorts of teachers show up with beautiful polished testimonies in support of this assessment. You suspect that it is one of the
intermediary organizations that brings them there. If you can investigate that and shed light on that, you might see more success in your advocacy. Victories are possible but they might require thinking outside the box of traditional policy advocacy and participating in policymaking as whistleblowers who draw attention to the shady dealings behind the scenes.

3. **Disruptors Build Networks and Coalitions**

Network collaborations are ubiquitous among reformers. They collaborate on projects, inform each other of policy conversations, and amplify each other’s work. Their work is driven by network principles – if you want to see change happen, bring like-minded actors together in a network and see how far they can take their ideas.

The work that I described earlier done in the construction of teacher preparation accountability spread throughout the nation primarily because of the networks that supported it. There was a formal structure created by CCSSO – the Network for Transforming Educator Preparation. There was a formal network of national partners that included The New Teacher Project, Data Quality Campaign, National Council on Teacher Quality, Deans for Impact, the Center for American Progress, and many others. National partners provided technical assistance and other resources to support network’s work. Many of these actors showed up as members of the #TeachStrong coalition organized by the Center for American Progress in 2015 with the vision of modernizing the teaching profession and redesigning teacher education if a democratic president is elected (Aydarova, in progress-b). The coalition released nine proposals for a comprehensive reform of every aspect of the teaching profession, one of which focused on accountability for teacher preparation programs. Proposals did not go anywhere because it was not a democrat who won the elections, but the coalition continued to weigh in on policy conversations. Many of the same network partners created coalitions and wrote letters of support
for the federal teacher preparation regulations or organized press events to support their introduction. Networks matter not only for the resources they provide, but also for the representation they make possible.

Finally, disruptors create whole organizations to support reform networks. For example, Partners in Innovations in Education was created in 2007. In 2019, the network included 90 advocacy organizations and charter school associations across 32 states and Washington, D.C. This network brings such diverse actors as: the Center for American Progress, Democrats for Education Reform, the National Council on Teacher Quality, TNTP, 50CAN (charter school advocate), Rodel Foundation, Educate Texas, Foundation for Excellence in Education, and others. PIE network brings together individuals and organizations that design and lobby for neoliberal and neoconservative reforms in education. Choice, charters, and vouchers are among the top of their agendas. But teacher policy and teacher education reforms have been at the top of PIE network priorities over the last couple of years and have included proposals for redesigning teacher education, changing accountability structures, modifying licensing exams, and expanding the role of alternative providers.

PIE website boasts that “through the Network, advocates gain relationships, resources, and best practices that they would not have otherwise had. Working as a ready network enables the rapid dissemination of success stories, ideas, and resources and allows for coordinated, rapid responses to crises and opportunities.” One of the resources the network provides is policy scripts that members can take, adapt, and bring to their legislators. Then they provide guidance on how to pitch those reforms to state-level policymakers. In Alabama where I am currently based a group affiliated with PIE network A+ Education Partnership celebrated a success of pitching and getting passed a bill that increases focus on literacy, with new “science of reading”
requirements for teacher prep programs. This might be familiar lingo for those of you who are in states where similar “foundations of reading science” requirements are popping up in new bills. NCTQ is one of PIE network’s national partners, so it is able to provide guidance on policy scripts that can be pitched to policymakers. In the interviews that I conducted almost all the participants affiliated with nonprofit and for-profit groups pedaling teacher education policy proposals mentioned PIE Network Annual summits as one of the best places to connect with other reformers. The summit includes events that have formal presentations and networking sessions where exchange of ideas around hot policy issues can more easily take place.

What is the lesson from this example for the teacher education community? It is important to remember that policy advocacy cannot be and should not be done in isolation. We need to look for ways to build networks, collectives, action groups, coalitions, and working groups. There are groups at the state level that are already pooling resources and working together to contest new policies. But think how much more we could accomplish if we had a shared national network with an online portal where we could trade position papers on edTPA, exchange testimonies explaining its dangers, or share action items for how it can be replaced or overturned. How much more we could accomplish if we had “hot policy issues” sessions where we could get together to share stories of success or to seek out advice for how to engage with policy proposals introduced in our states during the annual meetings of our professional organizations?

We need to come together to pursue not just shared counteraction but a shared vision. There are examples of that happening already. I have already mentioned Education Deans for Equity and Justice as one of the networks that works to advance a justice-focused agenda. Another example is a group called Teacher Education Collective that brought together 6 scholars
committed to issues of equity and justice who are working together to disrupt discourses of neoliberalization and privatization in the US teacher education. I have collaborated with a group of junior scholars to start Teacher Education Thought Collective that is dedicated to envisioning what teacher educators could do as public intellectuals to disrupt systems of oppression, inequity, and injustice. Of note is also an initiative “Teacher Solidarity” – an independent website that brings together educators fighting against neoliberalization of education around the world. Lois Weiner currently runs the project and wanted me to share that if anyone wants to learn more and join that work, they can definitely use help.

4. Disruptors Build Relationships with Policymakers

One way in which intermediary organizations engage in policy advocacy is by building relationships with policymakers and legislators. Disruptors look for opportunities to establish rapport with policymakers and exchange ideas about directions of reform. Now, they do have more relational capital as they tend to move between positions in the state, non-profit, and for-profit sectors and often know many of the legislators and policymakers personally. But they still find ways to establish connections in order to influence policy-making.

One way disruptors do that is by drawing policymakers into a conversation – they ask Senators and Representatives to share their vision for a proposal under consideration and offer their own suggestions for what could work. For example, the Center for American Progress last year hosted a talk by Senator Patty Murray – who serves on the U.S. Senate committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions to share her vision for the reauthorization of Higher Education Act, which among other things includes Title 2 on Teacher Quality. Senator’s Murray 10-minute presentation was bare bones of talking points. After Senator Murray’s presentation, the panel of experts connected to CAP’s networks added flesh to those bones with their own
proposals and ideas; questions and answers afterwards also offered food for thought that staffers could take back to the senators and representatives about what can be added or changed in the current drafts of HEA reauthorization. Disruptors find creative ways to be heard.

Another way disruptors build relationships with policymakers is by organizing summits for policymakers to hear reform ideas. ExcelInEd Foundation, for instance, runs an annual summit where they invite policymakers and legislators from across the entire country to come and learn about possibilities for education reform in their contexts. For instance, in 2019, 37% of 972 attendees represented state sector: senators, representatives, governors, state superintendents, state commissioners, representatives of state boards of education, officials from education agencies, and so on. Together with them attended the summit folks from the private sector – for-profit organizations selling new panaceas that will address the ills of failing educational institutions. Note that academics comprise less than 3% of the attendees. And of course, representatives of intermediary organizations attended, facilitated sessions, and presented their work. This year, Kate Walsh, for example, was a panelist on a session titled “End the Reading Wars, Now!” and you can probably guess how she proposes it should be done. The representatives of the Relay Graduate School, High Tech High Graduate School of Education, and Match Education led the conversation during the session titled “How Charter Schools Are Developing Great Teachers.” That conversation was about all the advantages of programs not affiliated with universities with the Q&A session focusing on what legislators can do to support the expansion of independent schools of education in their states. No one in the audience asked critical questions or offered evidence that would debunk disruptors’ claims.

Why am I sharing this? Because such events create space where ideas that disruptors developed spill over into the policy-making community. As I observed the events and interacted
with summit participants during meals (all meals were catered on site) or networking events, I saw a lot of genuine excitement about possibilities that people envisioned. As I chatted to different folks, I learned that many of them came multiple years in a row and found this summit to be one of the most thought-provoking and helpful events because they got a chance to hear from experts about what works. I am also sharing this to point out that very few university-affiliated faculty or students attended this event. Apart from invited speakers who amplified and supported the message of neoliberal reform, folks I saw (and there were very few of them) rarely engaged in conversations or contestations. I am not suggesting that academics should come to such events to get on board with the reform agenda – we have plenty of evidence to be skeptical about what these experts say. What I am, however, suggesting is that the voice of reason and research that is more expansive than number-crunching to prove a point was largely missing from this event.

Possible lessons to draw out can be to look for ways to participate in events that intermediary organizations organize to dispel some of the myths circulated there. There is a possibility of gaining a seat at the table but there is also a danger of invoking wrath for “protecting the status quo” and “refusing to do right by the kids.” A bigger lesson could be to look for ways to build relationships with legislators and policymakers through whatever means are accessible, so that even if they go to an ExcelInEd summit or a similar event, we would have enough of a rapport to engage in a substantive conversation to dispel those myths. Through our research project, we have heard about “education celebration” days where colleges of education celebrate their successes and offer awards to those who are doing good work, in classrooms or in policymaking. On my campus, we have had formal talks and informal meetings with prominent invited speakers as well as leaders in the community and in the state. Here, for example, is a
picture from a small breakfast event we held when David Stovall visited our campus and Representative Jeremy Gray and Auburn City Council member Bob Parsons joined us for a conversation about changes that have to happen in education. All of these events are helpful for building a relationship and for creating spaces for dialogue BEFORE any substantive reforms need to be discussed.

5. Disruptors Mobilize Knowledge (or the lack thereof)

One of the stories that intermediary organizations like to tell about teacher education is that we just don’t know what works. For instance, nonprofit actors often emphasize “the absence of an adequate knowledge base and the lack of data that allow us to identify confidently what the essential characteristics of strong teacher preparation programs are” (CCSSO, 2016) as well as “the paucity of research and data underlying some of teacher preparation’s current practices” (Allen, Coble, & Crowe, 2014). While the knowledge base in the field is potentially uneven and is imbued with tensions and contradictions – as any academic or professional field would be – it is nevertheless thriving and moving forward on different fronts. This observation was made by David Berliner (1986) and was reiterated by Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2016).

But claiming there is a void allows disruptors to claim that they now have the authoritative knowledge on the matter. I recently analyzed references and citations in 17 reports central to the promotion of accountability regimes in teacher education (Aydarova, in progress-a). Why those reports? Because often disruptors share those reports with legislators and policymakers with suggestions on how to reform education. References were coded based on the disciplinary and professional affiliations of their authors – whether authors were affiliated with the field of education, other disciplines, were located outside of traditional educational structures and educational organizations, or represented state agencies. In those references, reports
produced by nonprofit, for-profit, and advocacy organizations constituted 42% of all references. With another large proportion of references coming from federal and state departments of education and a smaller proportion coming from other fields (such as economics, engineering, and medicine), knowledge produced by the field of education is represented only by 26% of all references. What a basic reference count reveals is that research produced by educators – broadly conceived – represents only a quarter of knowledge mobilized in shaping policies in teacher education.

To analyze the knowledge shared in the community and to identify more prominent sources of knowledge, I applied social network analysis to the same set of references. Focusing on the authors of reports, I created maps that capture which authors have more influence through the number of times their works gets cited or references. Some of the clear leaders are CCSSO, Center for American Progress, Gates MET project, CALDER, TPA, NCCTQ, and Data Quality Campaign. This means that proposals for teacher education accountability are constructed primarily with the knowledge produced by disruptors themselves – nonprofit and for-profit organizations, think-tanks, and advocacy organizations.

What is the problem with that? Some of intermediary organizations engage in high-quality research and are careful to follow standards of rigor for the studies they conduct. But most of the writing that disruptors produce is at best literature reviews and at worst opinion pieces with quotes from like-minded actors. When I interviewed policy analysts from the intermediary sector, I asked how they conducted research for their studies – it was the most awkward part of the interview. Most of them got defensive – most of the time they don’t have access to research databases so they have to have “workarounds.” Those who were honest would just say that they find out about research findings on Twitter:
To start on a project, we'll often find meta-analysis or other sort of big seminal reports, and then start unpacking them. Then we'll often do interviews as well, so we'll find people that we've read, or people that are smart people out there, and then reach out to them to try to do interviews. We have a workaround. A lot of people will give us information. So if we send an email to someone, they'll send us their paper, or I'll read a lot of working papers that aren't the final version, but they're pretty close. I'm on Twitter. And so if someone who I know will tweet out an article, and they're at a university, they almost have standing policies that they will always send an article. (Interview, August 2019)

The need for “workarounds” actually makes sense. With paywalls for major publishing houses, most intermediaries that influence teacher education policies have no or only minimal access to academic journals. As a result, we see what Zeichner and Conklin (2016) call an “echo chamber” effect where the same points get repeated over and over again without any empirical evidence to support them or critical engagement with the literature that debunks them.

There is an opportunity for us to step in. We could and should look for ways to make research on teacher education more publicly available. Whether publishing preprints of articles in a centralized location or making more current scholarship available through ERIC, we need to look for opportunities to open access to our findings. We could also look for ways to be more persistent and consistent in making the knowledge produced in the field of teacher education a matter of public conversations or debates. Let’s have Twitter chats about new interesting studies. Let’s have a standard hashtag that we all use when we read something interesting and useful on teacher ed.

Finally, what can be most helpful if we engaged in an effort to provide research syntheses of the studies that have been done. AERA published results of the teacher education panel 10 years ago with chapters synthesizing what we know or do not yet know. But that volume ended up being written by academics for other academics – and disruptors ended up cherry-picking what they wanted out of that volume (we don’t know anything). But what if we had a website
where we assembled two or three-page syntheses on major issues of the day – research on edTPA, research on residence programs, research on accountability issues written specifically in simple jargon-free language aimed at policymakers. At the end of the day, staffers that draft legislation do not have access to any research databases either and they do not have the capacity to evaluate research findings. But we could make a concerted effort summarizing findings and sharing those with them. After all, that is what they would want to see. As one of the powerful behind-the-scenes technocrats explained to me during an interview, “To me, these synthesis type activities are more pertinent for what policymakers and practitioners can use than individual research studies. One individual research study might be interesting to read. But then another research study next month, might contradict it. So I'm much more inclined to believe that if you can synthesize across wide body of literature over a period of time, that you're much better informed for an action that you want to take, even if your goal is that you want to be informed by research. So broader is better.”

Here is our opportunity – let’s use it. You might not have time to do extensive data collection and analysis for a research project, but you might be reading articles that are on a topic that is interesting to you – even brief summaries that are publicly accessible could do us so much good because they would work to dispel the myth that we simply don’t know anything about teacher education.

6. Disruptors Make their Stories Public

Disruptors are strategic in their use of the media. Many groups make sure that projects they carry out and reports they publish become highlighted in national media. So, when an author toiled on a “research study” for three months, there are two paths that can be taken. A big fanfare public event that media is invited to for a press release or they send it off to the media or
communications team to pitch stories about this report to journalists. Some of these articles appear in Washington Post or New York Times. But often they end up reaching a wider range of outlets – the Economist, Business Insider, U.S. News and World Report, and even state-level media outlets like AL.COM in Alabama. These columns reach much wider audiences, including political, social, and economic elites with much greater speed and efficiency than anything that appears in an educational journal. This also means that these messages shape perceptions of policymakers about the problems in the field – whether they are real or made up – even if they have no direct contact with disruptors themselves. And, as a side note, most of the time affiliations of the authors or even their names are not given in the text, so the connection with the actual intermediaries can only be established if one actively seeks out this information by checking names or going to the organizations’ own websites. Some of them are transparent and provide links upfront, others bury this information because they have been accused for using media platforms in ways that violate the rules associated with their nonprofit status.

There is another side to this story of media engagement. Intermediary organizations not only spread their messages through national media, they also either run their own media platforms or they monopolize philanthropically-controlled media outlets. For example, the Fordham Foundation that in the 90s began the aggressive push for solving the “teacher quality problem,” in its 2002 report summarized how it managed “to win the war of ideas” by creating its own media outlet – Education Next. This magazine publishes much of what is produced by intermediaries but with a specific ideological filter that amplifies the narrative of failure in public education – or as PIE describes it “In education advocacy, we are often focused on describing the worst parts of our school systems” (PIE Network, 2018, p. 7). Education Next promotes choice, deregulation, alternative routes, and punitive accountability for university-based programs. At
ExcelInEd summits, all attendees receive a free issue of Education Next. A briefer version that targets specifically policymakers is Education Gadfly that includes a digest of major news specifically curated for those who have little time to engage with anything else. As to other platforms, the 74 million come to mind as an outlet that on the surface promises bipartisan neutral analysis but in the end is controlled by major conservative groups in the country and ends up producing content that reproduces the messages that these groups favor – choice, accountability, performance pay, residency programs, or higher accountability for teacher prep. Examples like this are countless and I will not go into describing all of them. But I will note, that through the use of media, many of these groups have managed to take control of the narrative on teacher education and have distorted its story beyond recognition, and not only in the US but also in other countries.

What can be done? I don’t think we would necessarily be able to run out and start our own media outlet just to get the record straight. But we could look for ways to engage with the content that is being produced. Submitting a response as a letter to the editor, or as a blog entry, or even as a tweet could do far more good than just remaining silent. We also need to disrupt the narrative of failure. Let’s use whatever means we have to craft our own narrative. Let’s look for ways to tell a good story for our field as a whole. Blogs, podcasts, youtube channels any medium that works for you – share the good story of your students’ learning, of the difference your school partnerships make in supporting novice teachers, of the relationships you are building with underserved communities, of the teachers engaging in the type of professionalism that goes beyond just reading off the script in from of the classroom. And if necessary, share the story of crises in underfunded segregated schools or teachers’ strikes demanding better pay and working condition. We need to set the record straight about so much of what is happening in teacher
education and in schools. Also, if you do engage in policy advocacy in your state, look for ways to tell the story of what is happening or the dangers of the bills you are responding to in your state or local paper.

There is also an opportunity for professional organizations to step in and actually amplify powerful stories, good studies, research syntheses, and commentaries by sharing those with legislators or event journalists, so that it is not an individual scholar but rather a professional group that says – hey, we have something important to share about the good work that our profession is doing. As Donna Wiseman (2012) writes public perceptions matter, policy is not developed with evidence and data but rather by managing and responding to public perceptions of what needs to be happening and we need to be mindful of that in our work.

7. Disruptors Activate Different Communities’ Voices

Intermediary organizations use the voices of educators, students, and parents to promote their agendas. Around 2007-2009, teachers who often came through TFA or similar routes figured out that unions did not address the concerns they had. So, with support from major philanthropies – Gates, Joyce, Schusterman, Walton, and Walmart Foundations, among many others – they started advocacy groups to channel teacher voice to policymakers, such as TeachPlus, Educators 4 Excellence, Hope Street Group Teaching Fellowship Program, and others. Through the policy advocacy programs that these organizations offer, teachers receive training on how to take on leadership roles, conduct research, and participate in policy advocacy. (Ironically, these are the very elements that are cut out under the push of technocratic outcomes-based reforms that disruptors promote). Through these programs, teachers are trained how to tell convincing stories and use evidence to influence policymakers’ decisions. Through their research projects, teachers “inadvertently” discover policy solutions that match perfectly what
intermediary organizations and venture philanthropists have been fighting for. Since teachers are in the actual classrooms, their voice is seen as more authentic and real, making policymakers potentially more open to the ideas that teacher voice organizations defend. Or, policymakers set on introducing neoliberal and neoconservative reforms can rely on teacher voice organizations to support the controversial measures they want. Value-added evaluations of teacher performance? Greater support for residency programs? Higher accountability for teacher preparation?

Whatever controversial proposals are being discussed, these groups will support reformers’ measures through whatever means their programs trained them to deploy – blogs, op-ed pieces in newspapers, testimonies before legislators, and reports based on teacher surveys.

How does that play out in teacher education policy? The debates around teacher preparation regulations at the federal level were raging between 2014 and 2017. In 2016, Hope Street Group issued a report that used teacher research claiming that teachers want to see their preparation programs held accountable for placement and retention in the teaching profession, graduation rates from preservice programs, educator effectiveness based on value-added scores, and several other indicators. In 2018, TeachPlus issued a report (Cormier, Hilton, & Teoh, 2018) that was allegedly based on teacher research with teacher respondents that argued that teachers want more accountability for teacher preparation programs, that there should be public reporting of teacher preparation scores, that teacher preparation programs should be ranked according to their scores, and that the best way to find out the quality of a teacher preparation program is their teachers’ effectiveness in the classroom (i.e. growth or value-added scores of their graduates).

The main framework of that study was the Key Effectiveness Indicators Framework that Teacher Preparation Analytics designed that I described earlier.
These reports received a lot of media coverage (guess why). Every time I look at these reports, I am amazed. What do teachers really want? More accountability for programs that prepared them? Here is a picture of my spouse trying to exercise after a day of teaching at an urban school serving predominantly Latinx students. If you asked him or any of his colleagues what their concerns were, it would never occur to them to say holding teacher prep accountable. At the end of the year, more than a quarter of teachers left that school - and not one of them would say they were leaving because of their preparation. Their concerns were deplorable working conditions (like mice walking through classrooms), scheduling that left no room for quick meals or even bathroom breaks, curriculum changes that teachers had no input into, overtesting that demoralized and stressed out students, and finally bottom low salary with basic benefits that did not cover much. And his school was not an exception. In the large city where we lived at that time, most of the schools serving minoritized students were in a similar state of disarray. The problem is that this side of the story is rarely delivered to policymakers or the public. Instead, using meaningless study designs that start with known answers and frame questions in such a way that no other finding is possible, teacher voice organizations promote solutions that match reformers’ and big donors’ agendas. Teachers’ voices become appropriated and used to legitimate disruptors’ agendas.

That brings me to a set of questions – what do we do in our field to prepare our students to participate in policy advocacy? Are there ways in which we provide opportunities for our undergraduate students to learn how to engage with policymakers? How do we work with our graduates when they leave our programs? Do we keep in touch with them when they graduate and look for opportunities to share their stories? What opportunities do doctoral students in teacher education get to learn code-switching between academic discourse and public discourse?
Do we prepare our future teacher education faculty or junior faculty joining our ranks to navigate the complex and contradictory nature of teacher education policy-making? These questions are not about providing support for a couple students or graduates here and there. These questions are about broader structures that we create as a professional field to raise new generations to be advocates for the well-being of children that they serve and for the well-being of the profession that they join. ATE standards lay out the framework for preparing teachers and teacher educators for policy advocacy. What is of utmost importance in these dire times is figuring out how to translate those standards into common place practices that ensure that there is university-based teacher education left in ten-years’ time.

To sum up, based on the analysis of what intermediary organizations have been doing to win the war ideas, here are some possible ways for teacher educators to engage in policy advocacy:

1. Pursue a Shared Vision of Equity and Justice
2. Look for Ways to Actively Participate in Policy-Making Processes
3. Build Networks and Coalitions
4. Build Relationships with Policymakers
5. Mobilize Knowledge
6. Make Your Story Public
7. Activate Different Communities

I recognize that it can feel overwhelming. You might say – “I am already stretched too thin. I cannot imagine taking more on and then this list is too huge to even contemplate.” I agree. However, I want to return back to the point I started out with – I am sharing insights and lessons for us individuals as well as the field as a whole. Many of the activities I described would be hard to do unless we come together and collectively rethink what these dire times require of us. Some of it could be more strategic support from our professional organizations, some of it can be
a rethinking of tenure requirements – public scholarship and policy advocacy do take time. Ultimately, we need to think together what the possibilities might be and together build structures that will keep us better prepared for the battles ahead. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu (2000), we need to learn to think like and think with social movements.

As we think of ways to reclaim our voice, knowledge, and authority, I want to close with a powerful message from one of the leaders in the field, “What a privilege in today's world that you have a voice, and you are in a position where you have the opportunity to be informed and to be engaged. So it's not just an opportunity. In many ways, it's a responsibility. If we don't ensure that our voice is heard, then then we're giving that voice to somebody else… If we choose not to be engaged and choose not to ensure that [policymakers] know our perspective and what we have to offer them, then we've given up that privilege and that opportunity and that power to somebody else.”

My invitation to everyone here today is to consider how we could engage in policy advocacy together to make sure that university-based teacher education is around not only in several years’ time but also 100 years down the road, so that future generations would get a chance to gather together for the 200th anniversary.
References


