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Critical Realignment of Humboldt's "Normal School": Meeting the Changing Landscape of Teacher Education

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Abstract

Our team of teacher educators share our process for reconceptualizing and reaffirming our vision of teacher education as the larger university shifts focus to that of becoming a polytechnic institution. We developed a heuristic to help us articulate our vision based on our commitments and contexts, and discuss the practical implications that this work has in our coursework and clinical practice. Our vision of the polytechnic teacher centers around four commitments: reflective, relational, reconstructive and research-oriented teaching. These commitments are informed by and exist in relationship with broader concepts of positionality, communities of practice, community partners, and polytechnic perspectives.

Keywords: polytechnic, polytechnic teacher, positionality, communities of practice

THE HUMBOLDT STATE NORMAL SCHOOL WAS founded in 1914 in response to a statute mandating the establishment of institutions for the "training and education of teachers...in the art of instructing and governing the public schools" of the state of California (Tierney et al. 2011). In the Spring of 1915, its first graduating class consisted of 15 white women who had successfully met the state's newly adopted teaching credential requirements (Tierney et al. 2011), beginning a storied tradition of preparing teachers to address the demands of the society they would serve (Tanner 1993). From its very inception, teaching-about-teaching has been at the forefront of the pedagogical and curricular aims of what is now referred to as California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt.

Cal Poly Humboldt has gone through considerable changes since its first graduating class received their

credentials in 1915, yet it has maintained its ongoing responsibility to prepare teachers to be qualified educators to meet the needs of our state's public schools. This responsibility is informed by a commitment to the children who learn in those schools and the society they will work to coauthor. As the university as a whole considers the paradigmatic shift it will undertake in the coming months and years it is imperative that those of us who are engaged in teacher preparation on this campus critically reflect on the emerging and unprecedented educational needs of the communities that we serve, and determine what more we can do, and how, to meet the continuing challenges facing the communities we serve. In other words, how can we become more innovative in supporting the educational requirements of a diverse population that needs the best and most highly qualified school teachers and administrators?

Presently, the state of California is experiencing a persistent and prolonged teacher shortage that directly impacts the educational experiences of students in our local K-12 schools. Schools see the greatest teacher shortage in special education, math, science, bilingual education, and in rural and low income areas (Carver-Thomas et al. 2021; Lambert 2021), which is reflected in the workforce needs of our regional community. Additional inequities exist as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color are disproportionately represented in the population of students without access to certified teachers throughout the state, which contributes to the persistent inequities and marginalization of Black and Indigenous students and students of color in K-12 classrooms (Cardichon et al. 2020; Sutchter et al. 2016). Teaching and learning in many of these schools results in a non-inclusive curriculum, which often excludes content outside of math and reading. If a school does not have the resources, time or staffing to effectively implement broader content such as arts, science, etc., students lack interactive and developmentally impactful educational experiences (Slouka 2009).

The lack of certified teachers across the state has also impacted educator preparation programs, as there is a need to prepare a large number of teachers at a faster rate. This need often results in an efficiency model of teacher preparation that is measured and defined by the intention of generating the most desirable output at the lowest level of resource expenditure (Bansford et al. 2005). Tasked by the state with addressing the expanding teacher shortage, while at the same time working to meet the curricular and structural standards governed by both the California Department of Education and the state's licensure agency, the Commission for Teacher Credentialing (CTC), teacher education programs find themselves in the double bind (Bateson 1956) of working to recruit and inspire future educators who might expand knowledge and affect societal change, while at the same time providing those future educators a highly refined, efficiency-driven model of what it means to be a credentialed teacher. The state bodies mentioned above often suggest quite expansive curricular expectations through published standards and required exams. They outline and establish the parameters

of how teacher preparation must be enacted through accreditation processes. Finally, they define the acceptable output of teacher preparation programs through a handful of teacher preparation assessments. All of these expectations, parameters and assessments serve to constrain burgeoning teachers' conceptions of what might constitute good teaching (Kornfeld 2007). This structure, in collaboration with the effort to affect the largest number of capable, credentialed teachers, in as brief a period of time as possible, and at the lowest possible expense for the system, tends to close off the potentiality of who might become a teacher and what they see as their role in schools and society, as well as narrowing the content of teacher preparation programs. The narrowing of content in teacher preparation can lead to deprofessionalization of the practice of educators, as educators find it necessary to rely on pre-packaged or scripted curriculum that is marketed to guarantee student success without consideration of the learning context or student needs (Schön 1983).

Through our work in teacher preparation, it is apparent that teacher preparation is, in and of itself, an intensive process with multiple factors that could potentially exclude viable candidates and their unique contributions to learning. These factors include, but are not limited to: cost of enrollment and state-based licensure fees, expansive time commitments (often precluding or complicating simultaneous employment), required standardized testing addressing both basic skills and subject matter proficiency, and availability and willingness of partnering schools and mentor teachers. These factors, along with countless others, could well limit the number of potential candidates and the diversity of the candidate pool. In order to begin the process of becoming a California credentialed teacher, a candidate must also hold a bachelor's degree and then have the privileged circumstances to be able to commit to the costs for instruction, examination, bureaucratic encumbrances, and significant time outside of employment (Commission on Teacher Credentialing n.d.). The established state-based mechanisms of credentialing teachers are preclusive by design, winnowing down the field of those who are interested in working in education to the more refined number of those who demonstrate they are ca-

pable of efficiently working within the constraints of a system modeled on the efficient dispersal of thoroughly vetted curriculum. A process which devalues ingenuity, creativity, and meeting the needs of varied classrooms and students.

In light of these concerns, critically cognizant teacher educators must actively engage future teachers in a praxis that allows candidates to navigate the labyrinthine systemic expectations of professional teaching. Teacher educators must also reflectively assess their teaching and its effects by researching emerging knowledge and practices, relationally coming to know and work with agents in their shared community, and, finally, working with that community to reconstruct a model of education that responsively meets the needs of that community. Because teacher preparation exists in the gaps, as Ronnie Davey (2013) suggests, between "the school and the academy, between theory and practice, between teaching and research, between the 'real world' and the 'ivory tower' and so on" (p. 2), teacher educators must navigate their already challenging praxis within an interstitial nexus of change.

As such, there is a great opportunity for Humboldt's new polytechnic designation to deepen, expand and shift the field of teacher preparation. The School of Education at Cal Poly Humboldt currently prepares teachers in elementary education, secondary education, and education of exceptional learners. The school also prepares educational leaders in educational administration. We, as teacher educators, maintain a commitment to addressing the workforce needs of California public schools through the preparation of teacher advocates who are prepared and committed to disrupting systemic inequities that exist in our communities. The transition to a polytechnic university provides us with an opportunity to explore, redefine, and grow the focus and purpose of teacher education on the Cal Poly Humboldt campus. These shifts will not necessarily lead to extended time in the program, which would result in additional costs for teacher candidates, but will lead to change in the content, focus and experiences that the program provides, as well as the focus on continued learning and professional engagement after the completion of the teacher preparation program.

The School of Education has consistently and historically engaged students and candidates in experiential, community-based, inquiry-centered learning that is formatively critical of existing structures and institutions that perpetuate inequity and oppression. As we shift to becoming a polytechnic institution, we are now positioned to take a critical look at our systems, including roles and structures, and to make deliberate pedagogical decisions that will define our practices in educator preparation programs.

The Polytechnic Teacher

As we conceive our vision of the polytechnic teacher (PTT), we draw upon four commitments in teacher education that frame our work and seek to inspire and prepare teachers who are committed to teaching practices that are reflective, relational, reconstructive and research-oriented. These four commitments are informed by and exist in relationship with broader concepts of positionality, communities of practice, community partners, and polytechnic perspectives. These founding commitments both exist separately and are inextricably intertwined. The synergy between each of these characteristics of the PTT in practice (figure 1) creates a generative environment for preparing future educators who advocate for socially just educational practices, implement antiracist pedagogies, and work to serve the needs of the communities in which they teach. These characteristics are also deeply rooted in the pledge that our students have been making since 1987 upon their graduation: "I pledge, as an Humboldt community member, to discover the social and environmental consequences of my choices and I will engage in positive change on our campus and in our community" (Cal Poly Humboldt n.d.).

As teacher educators, we engage with pre-service teachers who choose teaching because they have passion for connecting with young people and children. Teacher educators must help candidates sustain their passion when faced with challenges and setbacks and to develop effective habits of mind that will sustain them throughout their teaching career. Teacher preparation programs strike a balance between guiding teachers to support them on their first day in the classroom and to sus-

tain them throughout their career as educators. The concept of sustaining teachers in the field underpins our work to prepare our graduates as “adaptive experts” who emerge from a polytechnic teacher preparation program with “core ideas and broad understanding of teaching and learning that give them traction in their later development” (Bransford et al., 2005 p. 3). A polytechnic educational context confronts the notion that

To the extent that the world is rapidly changing and that this change will continue to impact educational goals and teaching strategies, prospective teachers need to understand how the natural desire to say, “just tell me what to do” will not serve them optimally for the challenges they will face... efficiency is extremely important; otherwise, we are overwhelmed by novelty.

But efficiency is also insufficient if we want to adapt. (Bransford et al., 2005 p. 77)

In our efforts to conceptualize the PTT beyond the constructs of state regulations, requirements, and the efficiency model, we have developed the following framework to articulate a conceptual understanding of our vision of the PTT as a model for educational change and purposeful disruption of ongoing educational systems. The following framework includes conceptions of polytechnic teacher education, as explored in figure 1. We employ this tool as a central framing of tendencies, a set of actions we are pursuing as a guide, and an interconnected framework not structured by a top-down approach. While we articulate this framework here, through implementation it is purposefully designed to maintain flexibilities and adapt to changing context, systems and influences.

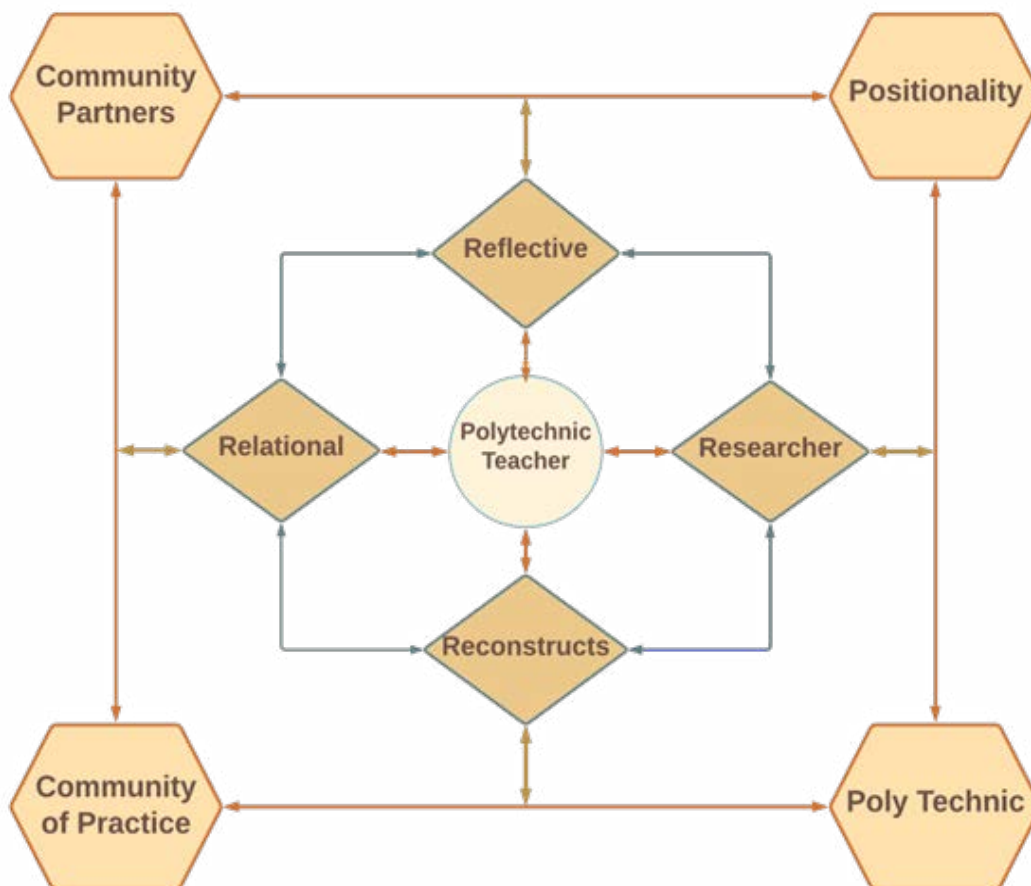


Figure 1: Polytechnic teacher

Reflective

We are in an age of the deprofessionalization of teachers in the field, however teachers continue to be called upon to address, deal with or solve many of society's challenges. Deprofessionalization occurs through top-down, hierarchical, prescriptive curriculum that often defaults to a one-size-fits-all approach to education, as well as in a highly politicized environment that dictates and limits what happens in educator preparation programs and classroom (Milner 2013). The defunding of schools and political movements that devalue education and the expertise of professional educators can shift teaching into a prescriptive model. This removes the reliance on teacher knowledge, experiences and larger contexts of the community. The reflective practice of the PTT model disrupts this deprofessionalization of teachers by centering teacher positionality, leading to considerations and critical examinations of identity, how it may change over time, and how it can be affected by historical and social changes happening around the person and community (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; Kezar & Lester 2010).

Reflective practice is central to shifting from a "how-to", also known as technical-rational, approach in teaching towards increased professionalism with an expanded focus on the positionality of teachers and teacher candidates (Schön 1983). Technical rationality is a framework rooted in the efficiency model and relies on the belief that a technique which is proven to be effective in one setting, application or context will be equally as effective in a similar setting, application or context. The goals of technical rationality include automation, consistency, predictability, and a concerning emphasis on external control. However, the relationships, context, individuality and the human component of the classroom setting is unpredictable. Curriculum designed for one set of students interacts differently with another set of students in a different context at a different moment. The PTT model openly rejects technical rationality in exchange for more thoughtful, reflective practice.

John Dewey (1904) defined reflective thinking as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge" (p. 9). While Dewey's

work provided a foundation for reflection practice, it was Schön's seminal text, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), that pushed the teaching field towards a focus on responding to a crisis of confidence. This crisis came out of the increasing reliance on technical rational approaches, such as "step-by-step" curriculum and teaching strategies guaranteed to ensure learning (Schön 1983). Schön contends that reflective practice instead encourages educators to respond spontaneously throughout the learning process and make informed decisions based on the needs of the learners and the ever-changing context. Similarly, Reeder et al. (2006) describes curriculum as a complicated dance in which learning opportunities emerge from the interactions and experiences of the participants, including the instructor as a participant in the group. In their participation, teacher candidates are encouraged to share and reflect on their histories and experiences in order to connect to human experiences through mutual understanding of their own and others' positionalities through focused study and storytelling (Connelly & Clandinin 1990). This kind of reflective practice provides a more conducive environment for the classroom and the teacher's experiences, while avoiding the pitfalls of deprofessionalization.

Relational

The PTT relies on relationality and the process of becoming a relational pedagogue to develop connectedness in and beyond the classroom. Relational theorists place the human relationships between students and teachers at the center of the educational experience and encourage deep questioning of the nature of the relationship and how it impacts the educational experience (Hinsdale 2016). Bateson (1991) defines relationships more broadly and suggests that the world is entirely composed of interconnected relationships, including relationships with broader contexts. He argues that an individual's relationship with these broader contexts provides meaning to the world. Schools and classrooms rely on these relationships amongst individuals, communities, families, curriculum, and content as well as on the larger social and environmental contexts that influence and shape all actions, interactions and experiences.

Reeves & Le Mare (2017) contend that teachers who utilize relational pedagogy are aware of and explicitly focus on the quality of their interactions with students to develop classroom communities that promote academic, social, and emotional growth. Using relational pedagogy as a core framing of a PTT preparation program, the authors center human relations and build community partnerships between Cal Poly Humboldt and P12 schools.

Educational institutions historically rely on hierarchical relationships which utilize a top-down structure to maintain the institution and participant roles. As the PTT begins to explore relational pedagogy, we strive to shift hierarchical (Volk 1995) concepts of relationships to more holistic approaches. The PTT begins to conceptualize holarchical (Volk 1995) structures and relationships for schools and learning communities. In contrast to the pyramid-like hierarchical structure, the holarchy may be visualized as a more circular structure that emphasizes horizontal relationships that are flexible, dynamic and fluid, as the teacher and learner are constantly co-constructing knowledge. In a holarchical structure, participants maintain their roles (Miller 2011; Miller 2016; Petrini 2015). Teachers are still teachers, students are students, etc. Knowledge is constructed collectively through flexible and adaptable relationships. Learning builds upon and sustains the knowledges and experiences of students and their communities (Paris & Alim 2017). This ultimately shifts the role of the polytechnic teachers from a traditional bestower of information to teacher as the facilitator of learning (Freire 2000).

Reconstructive

Social reconstructions are an integral part of these authors' envisioned PTT model. Social reconstruction is a theoretical orientation in education theory that suggests that the practice of teaching is at least partially that of working with students to imagine and sculpt the perpetually emerging social reality in which those students will have authorial agency (Grant & Sleeter 1993) and that we will collaboratively realize and inhabit. This is especially important in light of the institutional theses offered in the Cal Poly Humboldt Prospectus (2022) that

suggest that the concepts that will serve to differentiate the Cal Poly Humboldt experience from that of other institutions include a meaningful and intentional focus on social and environmental justice with participation in our local and statewide communities.

The skills and knowledge pertinent to a social reconstructive aim in education must move beyond historical knowledge of and critical attunement to injustice. The PTT commitment includes encouragement towards imaginative and creative practices that, paired with robust anti-racist, socially just and ecologically sustaining curriculum, would provide our teacher candidates and their students the capacities necessary to become ethically righteous agents of change. This commitment stands in stark contrast to multiple trends in teacher education and educational policy in the United States. Legislative actions have been taken in multiple states to constrain or outright ban curricular content, many targeting work that speaks to the convoluted strawman of Critical Race Theory (Bracken et al. 2022). States have been actively and vigorously closing off conceptual connections that might lead students to realizations of injustice and constructive ideation in response to those realizations (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). In light of both our university's embedding of ecological and social justice into institutional learning objectives and the national shifts in direct opposition to such commitments and objectives, it is important that we vocally maintain a commitment to social reconstructions in PTT teaching and learning.

As schools continue to grow more racially diverse (Matias & Mackey 2016), teacher educator practices that deeply explore social reconstruction become even more crucial. The commitment to social reconstruction in teacher education is based on the understanding that "continuing business as usual in preservice teacher education [especially in regard to white racialized identities] will only continue to widen the gap between teachers and schools" (Sleeter 2001 p. 96). Equipping PTTs with social reconstruction skills to work with students and communities of practice to dismantle systems of inequities and oppression must be critical to teacher preparation. Because communities of practice and collaboration with our community partners is vital in PTT teaching

and learning, it must become a truly synergistic relationship that works collectively to create change.

Research Oriented

The classroom teacher as researcher is not a new concept. Many labels have been used for the type of research teachers conduct in the classroom and at school, including action research (Elliott 1991; Zeichner 1993), practitioner research (Zeichner & Noffke 2001), collaborative inquiry (Bray 2000), critical inquiry (Aaron et al. 2006) and teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1993; Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1999; MacLean & Mohr 1999). Commonly, teacher research is a process in which a teacher identifies problems in the context of their schools and classroom and proposes inquiry-based methods to address the identified problems. Through systematic evaluation and data collection, educators observe, analyze, enact changes, and share results to benefit their classrooms and the larger educational community. Teacher research has been acknowledged within the educational research community as a means to promote critical reflection and reform in K-12 settings (Rathgen 2006).

The PTT places research at the forefront of their teaching practice. As inquiry-oriented practitioners, the PTT uses action research methods to improve their teaching, by implementing techniques which are supported through teacher preparation in the development of effective research methods and procedures (Davis et al. 2018). The methods used in inquiry-based research contributes to the development of the PTT's identity and strengthens their current and future practice (Goodnough 2011). Through use of inquiry, the PTT moves away from the transmission model of teaching and develops a transformational focus (Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009).

The PTT model strives to support ambitious teaching strategies in the classroom through action research and inquiry-based practices. The goals of PTT preparation highlight conceptions of teacher knowledge that Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) describe conceptually as knowledge-of-practice. This conception of teacher learning represents a critical constructivist, agent-of-change position that centers the concept that both

knowers and knowledge are connected to larger political and social agendas within education. Under this conception, the program, the local community context, and the PTT base their conceptual understanding of learning to teach based on the idea that teachers

learn by challenging their own assumptions; identifying salient issues of practice; posing problems; studying their own students, classrooms, and schools; constructing and reconstructing curriculum; and taking on roles of leadership and activism in efforts to transform classrooms, schools, and societies. (Cochran-Smith & Lytle p. 278)

Under this conception, being (or becoming) a PTT involves a conjoining of understandings that would ideally occur during inquiry research in which they use their classrooms as research centers to learn more about their students and high-leverage teaching strategies. Bullough and Gitlin (1995) advocate that preservice teachers use research and inquiry to investigate their own positionalities as emerging teachers and develop "personal theories" to think about who they are as teachers and students, particularly with regard to race, class, culture, ethnicity, language, and gender. Advocates for social justice and school change operate within this frame and encourage the PTT to understand themselves as learners and to adopt an inquiry stance to their emerging teaching research.

The PTT's ability and interest in leading research in their field is critical to bringing innovative teaching and knowledge to our community and program. The authors of this paper are interested in contributing to an educator population who are inquiry-oriented so as to foster a cycle of improvement in schools which would ultimately benefit children and adolescents. Research indicates that teachers' engagement in practitioner-oriented action research has a positive effect on their teaching when they are supported in the development of effective research methods and procedures (Davis et al. 2018). With teachers, Goodnough (2011) also finds that the act of conducting research contributes to the development of the teacher's identity and strengthens their future practice. However, even more importantly,

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) argue that this type of inquiry-oriented focus moves educators away from a transmission model of teaching and learning and contributes to a transformational focus.

Implications & Conclusions

With the recent designation of the university as a polytechnic, Cal Poly Humboldt's School of Education is uniquely situated to build a culture within teacher preparation, as well as our local partner schools, that refocuses teacher education to a broader, more reflexive lens. We believe we can address these goals through the visions articulated above, which empowers teachers to take on a professional identity in their practice. The professional identity includes asking critical questions, engaging in inquiry, and taking time to reflect, all while encouraging teachers to consider their own positionality and engage with community partners through communities of practice.

While many teacher educators are interested in and explicitly engage with the concepts explored in the PTT, preparing for a full shift to the framework will require collaboration, engagement and shared-learning opportunities that move away from hierarchical and technical-rational frameworks in teaching and teacher preparation. This type of work can be accomplished through the structured learning opportunities found in professional learning communities and professional development, as well as in unstructured conversations that allow frameworks to emerge, shift and develop in an articulation of existing ideas. The nature of learning in this context is non-linear, multidirectional, and iterative due to the complex, ever-changing and context-driven nature of the PTT framework. The PTT framework is not a one-size-fits-all, unilateral approach to teaching, but an approach that resembles a more complicated conversation amongst stakeholders and participants. The community of practice and community partners must be integrated in this conversation to define the context and provide an essential component of professional learning. In the PTT framework, learning continues long after the teacher preparation program through the development of professionalism and life-long professional learning.

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